**VALLEY BRIDGE – April 13, 2016**

**THE WORD FROM RICK – “A Couple of Items to Share This Week”**

Very early Saturday morning, I returned from the Board of Pensions Regional Benefits Conference in San Diego, where we spent a rather fast-paced time gaining insights into the “redesigned” benefits plan that will be offered to our denomination. Once again, it felt like drinking from a fire hose, and it will take some time to fully understand the implications that it will have for us here in Minnesota Valleys.

To that end, we have invited Edward Thompson, our Board of Pensions Regional Representative, to spend some time with us in early August. He is making plans to be here on August 8-9. We know that he will be sharing time with us at the August 9 Presbytery meeting in Browns Valley, as well as sponsoring a lunch for retired pastors and spouses in Willmar on August 8. Other parts of Edward’s schedule are still being negotiated.

There are a number of changes in the plan, particularly surrounding the medical options and those who are not in called and installed congregational positions that will be worth learning about. In addition, there is a major effort directed at engaging more of our church employees in different aspects of the plan. We will work together with Edward and with our Presbytery Meeting Planning Team to make maximum use of Edward’s time with us. Stay tuned for further information!

======

Moving on to another topic: on Monday, this week’s edition of The Alban Weekly arrived in my e-mail inbox. I know that a number of our pastors get this e-mail, but I know that an even greater number of you all probably don’t see it. The title of this week’s offering immediately grabbed me: “6 Facts about How American Congregations are Changing.” This article shares insights gleaned from the National Congregations’ Study and offers a quick snapshot of the nature of congregations across our nation, and highlight changes that have taken place between 1998 and 2012.

The 6 Facts highlighted by the article are:

1. *People are increasingly concentrated in very large congregations.* It was observed that about one-half of all churchgoers belong to the largest 7% of congregations.
2. *There is growing diversity among and within American congregations*. Only “11% of churchgoers were in an all-white congregation in 2012 versus nearly 20% in 1998.”
3. *Many pastorals are bi-vocational.* “One-third of pastors work more than one job.”
4. *Worship services are becoming more informal and expressive.* Most notable decreases were in “singing by choirs” (-9%), “use of printed bulletins or programs” (-10%), and “use of organ” (-11%). Predictably, the most notable increase was the “use of projection equipment” (+23%).
5. *People in smaller churches give more money to their churches than do people in larger churches.*
6. *Congregations focus more on serving the needy than on trying to effect systemic change.* “87% of all congregations engage in some form of social service, with food assistance being the most active social service pursued.” It is noted that “same-sex marriage/equal rights for gays and lesbians is the only contemporary social conflict on which congregation-based activism occurs about equally on both sides of the issue.”

I share these highlights with you, because I think they might be worth pondering with the people in our congregations, as you look at who you are and where you are going. Where do you see your congregation within this snapshot? These are only the highlights of the study and the article. There is significantly more information in the study itself. If you are interested in digging deeper into the National Congregations Survey, I would encourage you to check it out. This is the link to help you find it: <http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/Docs/NCSIII_report_final.pdf>

Grace and Peace,

**Rick**