

Co-Leaders' Report

May 2020

As I approach the end of my first year with the PNENJ, I was recently reminded of a general principle regarding the dynamics of change. When significant change occurs, we can expect periods of confusion, false starts, long learning curves, and awkward transitions. That feels like a pretty accurate description of the past year but it is also a sign that changes are taking place. In the paragraphs below, I want to celebrate some of the work that has been accomplished and recognize the challenges we face.

Finance

The Finance Task Force (Judy Tharaud, Joan Van Pelt, Dave Bomgaars, Eileen Lindner, Jamie Cella, and Skip Winter) has been meeting almost weekly for the past year. They have worked diligently to consolidate three financial systems into one by successfully creating and transferring accounts, closing out vendor relationships, consolidating payroll, and developing a budget for 2022. They are currently working on the development of a capital assets policy and team but this has not come without tension. In fact, it illustrates one of the fundamental challenges we face as a new presbytery - how will we as a presbytery make decisions when there is more than one worldview present - especially when it comes to the stewardship of our resources.

Grants and Community Mission

Last fall, a number of congregations were anticipating regular disbursements of grant funds to assist with seasonal outreach programs in their community. Other congregations were seeking financial assistance for programs, disaster relief, and general ministry support. It became evident that a team was needed to address these requests. Since the Vision Team was the only entity available to receive those requests, the Grants Commission and the Community Ministries Commission were formed to allow the Vision Team to focus on their efforts on discerning a path forward. The commissions have developed grant criteria and a grant process and application. They have also worked with the PC(USA) Associate for Refugees & Asylum to explore refugee ministry in our Presbytery. Like the Finance Task Force, these two commissions have also had to negotiate differing worldviews and interpretations of what mission might look like in our new presbytery.

Personnel

When the Personnel Team (Felix Amoyaw, Don Steele, Patricia Baker, and Fran Thiessen) began to organize last fall, it began with a simple task - review the current job descriptions. That task took on new urgency when the need arose to find a new bookkeeper. A month later the team pivoted to consider a new office administrator and how that position has changed during the transition. Recently, the personnel team was informed that our African Ministries Coordinator will be retiring soon and so a new conversation is beginning. It seems that every month brings a new challenge and new questions to consider. The work of the team has also not been without controversy as staff positions have been eliminated or shifted to volunteers.

Visioning

When the Presbytery of Northeast New Jersey was made official in March of 2021, I believed that by the May 2022 meeting we would have completed a discernment process and began the process of implementing a new presbytery structure. What I quickly discovered is that a lot of issues that had nowhere to be addressed. Those issues often fell to the Vision Team to discuss and resolve. This led to a number of false starts in the discernment process and confusion about the role of the Vision Team.

With the addition of several commissions and teams, the Vision Team has more support so that it can focus on its work with CounterStories Consulting and designing a discernment process for the whole presbytery. There is still a steep learning curve for leading a process on this scale but the Vision Team is figuring out how to take small bites in order to keep the process moving forward.

Organization

Finally, a great deal of my first year has been dedicated to the technical issues of our transition. In addition to working with the teams and commissions listed above, I've been working with our temporary office assistant to consolidate three offices into one - including office technology and records (congregation and minister files). I continue to work on merging and updating our databases so we will one day be able to produce an accurate presbytery directory. Recently, I have been upgrading our technology infrastructure and restructuring our communications capabilities. What I have learned is that in this age of COVID is that everything takes longer to complete.

I enjoy the technical work, but my greatest satisfaction still comes from setting all of that aside to answer your questions, respond to your concerns, and be a resource to both pastors and congregations. I have enjoyed participating in your search for new calls and new pastors. I have enjoyed worshiping with you and praying for you. In our conversations, you have shared what is important to you, your deeply held values, and your struggles. That knowledge will help me in charting a course for the changes ahead.

While this first year has been filled with periods of confusion, false starts, long learning curves, and awkward transitions, I am looking forward to my second year. There is still much to learn about each other and how we can bring such diverse worldviews together. I believe that God has provided us with enough wisdom and compassion that we can move ahead together and co-create this new thing God is doing in our midst.