

Co-Leader / Resource Presbyter Report
September, 17 2022

Working in the office during my first year as your Organizing Co-Leader is exactly what I needed to do in order to help consolidate and organize three offices, three phone systems, three filing systems, three...I think you get the picture. So when my first year anniversary rolled around in June, I made a decision that it was time to get out of the office, travel around, and get to know more about your and the communities that make up our new presbytery. Over the past three months I spent my time visiting with sessions, pastors, and attending worship in a number of our congregations. To date, I have made 30 visits and since I began in 2021 I've been able to worship with 40 of our congregations. In total, I've connected with 57 of our 98 congregations. I still have a long way to go but don't be surprised if you see me in your pews sometime this fall or you receive a request from me to meet up face-to-face.

It is also important to me that I visit with all of you who are not engaged in congregational ministry - our chaplains, mission co-workers, and those working in various institutions. You can also expect an email from me so that I can hear how the presbytery can be a resource to you in your particular ministry. And of course, I want to connect with the 65 members of the presbytery who are honorably retired. If you want to reach out to me directly to set something up, please send me an email [shuston@pnenj.org] or send me a text [973-953-6700].

During my visits, I'm drawing on four questions from my appreciative inquiry toolbox. The four questions focus on:

1. **Strengths** - What are the strengths of your congregation/ministry?
2. **Opportunities** - What are the opportunities that exist in your community/setting to utilize those strengths in new ways?
3. **Aspirations** - What is your preferred future or the future to which God is calling you?
4. **Results** - What results will tell you that you are heading in the right direction?

Let me just pause and say that we have an amazing Presbytery. I am so impressed with what you are doing. You are feeding thousands of people every month and creatively meeting needs that are not being met by other organizations. What stands out the most is your love for one another, for the church, and for your community. Your witness is strengthening the whole church and giving glory to God.

And yet, there is also a sense that some things have been lost during the pandemic. The final question I ask is, "How can the Presbytery be a resource to you?" What I've learned from asking this question is that there are no universal resourcing needs. Each person or group I've talked to has a unique set of circumstances and the presbytery staff is just a phone call, email, or text away to help answer your questions. And where there are areas of overlap, we are beginning to explore how we can bring people together to resource and support one another. For example, many people are asking, "How do we get people to return to in-person worship and how do we better connect with our community?"

One potential way to address these common concerns is through the development of “Communities of Practice.” In a nutshell:

“Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner

While the current conversation about Communities of Practice comes out of the tech world, it is an ancient practice that looks a lot like the early church. When I first read about the concept, I thought about Hebrews 10:24-25 which is also quoted in our missional invitation,

And let us consider each other carefully for the purpose of sparking love and good deeds. Don't stop meeting together with other believers, which some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead, encourage each other, especially as you see the day drawing near. CEB

Below are some of the things that can happen in a community of practice.

- **Problem solving:** “Can we work on this design and brainstorm some ideas; I'm stuck.”
- **Requests for information:** “Where can I find the information on this thing?”
- **Seeking experience:** “Has anyone dealt with an issue like this before?”
- **Reusing assets:** “We started a new program last year. I can send it to you and you can easily tweak it for your needs.”
- **Coordination and synergy:** “Can we combine the purchasing of supplies so we can get a better discount?”
- **Discussing developments:** “What do you think of the new resource? Does it really help?”
- **Documentation projects:** “We have faced this issue five times now. Let's write it down once and for all.”
- **Visits:** “Can we come and see your program? We want to establish one in our community.”
- **Mapping knowledge and identifying gaps:** “Who knows what? What are we missing? What other groups should we connect with?”

Communities of Practice often happen organically but they can also be intentional communities. I believe this model, which has existed by many names in the church, is one possible way to embrace the missional invitation to shift from regulatory oversight to mutual accountability, creating spaces of safety, respect, and honor where each leader and ministry is cherished and supported. It is also a shift from a focus on institutional maintenance to relationship building that directly impacts the day-to-day ministry of the body of Christ, wherever it is called to serve.

Peace and Joy,

Steve Huston