

Memorandum

To: Presbytery Council
From: Steve Plank
Date: January 5, 2009
Re: Presbytery dialogue

Proposal –

On behalf of the Session of Central Presbyterian Church, I would ask that Council direct the Committee on Ministry and/or the Committee for Congregations to develop opportunities for dialogues between congregations on ways to share staff, resources, facilities, and programs, and that these begin within the next two months.

Background –

Central Presbyterian Church was in dire financial straits this fall. We had had a successful capital campaign a few years ago, but the donations to our regular budget took a “hit,” and we never recovered from that. We had gone through the meager reserves that we had, and we were quite literally operating from Sunday to Sunday, at times even delaying payments that needed to be made. Take an older congregation, the realities of membership decline (or even stability during the best years), and combine those with the economic realities we all are facing, and the situation became critical earlier this fall. We since have had a Session retreat about this, and a congregational Town Hall Meeting to discuss our financial situation, and we have come up with several ideas which we are pursuing. Members have increased their giving by modest amounts, and, taken together, that has helped us turn the corner for the time being.

I bring this to Council’s attention because I know that Central is not alone in this. From first hand reports I’ve heard...

- Underwood Hills has asked their pastor to reduce her salary, with a subsequent reduction in her hours worked in service to the church.
- Church of the Master has recommended cutting the salaries of all of their staff by 10%.
- Westminster (Omaha) is wondering whether or not they’ll be able to afford to call a full-time pastor.
- Lowe Avenue, which has been operating on investments and reserves, will exhaust those resources within the year.

I’ve heard other reports from people in congregations of all sizes that things are tight, and futures are uncertain.

One of the things we have discussed, and something that I have tried to do almost since arriving in Omaha over nine years ago, is engage in dialogues with other congregations about how we might be able to share staff, resources, facilities, and programs. So far, there has been no

success in sharing in any of these ways. At our Town Hall meeting in November, we discussed this sharing idea, and someone asked if Presbytery just couldn't close some of the smaller churches and have them merge with larger ones. One person immediately said, "No, they can't." I said, "Well, they really probably can, but, trust me, after one attempt to do that years ago known as the North Corridor Study, Presbytery is *not* going to be doing this again."

However, there *is* a role I believe that Presbytery can play – an important and vital role – that would be helpful to us and to so many of our churches. It seems to me that the *Presbytery* can encourage congregations to begin dialogues about ways in which we might be able to share staff, resources, facilities, and/or programs, and that the Presbytery can foster and structure these kinds of conversations in ways that individual initiatives would not be able to achieve.

Here are some of the ideas about sharing that we have discussed at different times at Central:

1. Encourage one or more other Presbyterian congregations to hire pastoral staff – a part-time associate for us, for example, who also would serve as the pastor of another congregation.
2. Encourage several congregations to hire a financial bookkeeping service/person, much like the Synod now does for most of the Presbyteries within its bounds.
3. Encourage one or more congregations to share the services of an Administrative Assistant – sharing time at each of the participating churches, or staying in one office but routing each church's phone number through that desk, or doing bulletins and other secretarial tasks via email or instant messaging between the churches.
4. Encourage one or more congregations to form a Larger Parish, much like is done in rural parts of the country. That is, several congregations would hire one or more pastors who would serve throughout the larger parish group of churches.
5. Encourage one of more congregations to share the services of a Director of Christian Education. (For example, there are 4 or 5 churches that have contacted Kris Adler, our DCE, in the past few years, using her as an occasional resource person. If several of our churches went together and hired her, or if Presbytery added her as an educational staff resource person, then she could be available to do more and provide more services to more places within the Presbytery).
6. Encourage smaller congregations to "nest" in larger congregations. That is, the smaller congregation would give up their building, and move themselves into another Presbyterian building, sharing space with that congregation, but keeping their own Session, their own pastoral leadership, and their own programming.
7. Encourage several congregations to go together, combining their resources to offer a confirmation class each year for their young people.

I had lunch in December with Sally Carlson from COM and Matt Nieman from CfC, and approached them with this idea. They reacted favorably. It seems to me that either or both of those committees in the Presbytery would be the appropriate place(s) from which these kinds of conversations might be developed.

If Council is in agreement that there is some wisdom in fostering these kinds of conversations, then I would ask that they direct the Committee on Ministry and/or the Committee for Congregations to develop opportunities for dialogues between congregations, and that these begin within the next two months. On behalf of myself and the Session here at Central, thank you for your consideration of this.