

# Spring 2024 John Calvin Presbytery (JCP) Connection Activities Summary

## Topic: Doing Church Differently – Beginning the Discussion

### Summary:

This summary provides the background literature and questionnaire results with possible uses and applications from two Spring 2024 gatherings of churches within the John Calvin Presbytery. Responses from the questionnaires reflect an eagerness to learn more about new church models, and to find strategies that will help congregations, both small and large, be more viable and vibrant churches.

### Background Literature:

Catherine Neelly Burton's intriguing article "The Future of the PC(U.S.A.) is Pastor-Less, and That's OK" appeared in the January 2024 *Presbyterian Outlook*. Several published responses quickly echoed the same forecast. Across denominations, congregations are growing smaller, and pastors are retiring faster than seminary students are graduating. Brekke (2024) asks, "What are small churches to do?"

Neelly Burton (2024), a Presbytery Mission/Ministry connector, reminds us that "a church doesn't have to have a pastor to be a viable church." On that positive note, she and others describe new leadership models that are working:

1. One model is to empower church members to lead congregations. Commissioned ruling elders (CREs) or CREs-in-training can pastor the congregation with a visiting pastor officiating communion, baptisms, and ordinations.
2. CREs, pastors, or a combination of the two can yoke with two or more churches within an area.
3. Blackburn, Neelly, and others also encourage connecting congregations with one another to share their experiences with new models as a powerful approach for empowering lay members to "be" the church.

Phillip Blackburn (2024) reinforced that worship for small churches has certainly changed in the last century. Yet while size may affect the model of the small church, it isn't what defines the heavenly calling. Regardless of congregational size there are budgets, buildings, and worship numbers to be considered. But, more importantly, churches must maintain a focus on at least two issues.

The first is "Where is Jesus?" (p. 2). He references Mathew 18:20: For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them. Blackburn says, "That may be a small number, but with Jesus it is enough."

The second focus describes how we are made one through Christ and are called to carry out the great ends of the church. Large or small, yesterday or tomorrow, the church is still the divine purpose that connects us. The six great ends of the church are (Book of Order G 1.02):

1. The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind.
2. The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God.
3. The maintenance of divine (of, from or like God) worship.
4. The preservation of the truth (of the gospel as truth).
5. The promotion of social righteousness (the promotion of what is right, good, just and fair for all).

6. Exhibition (a display or demonstration) of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world. (The fulfillment on Earth of God’s will.)

Blackburn (2024) finishes with a challenge to grow the church by growing church-to-church connections. “My thought is that we sit down as congregations, all across the denomination, and think about how we might live into the description of the job our churches have held for almost 115 years.” (p. 2)

Where to start? Two recent opportunities allowed for face-to-face discussions among congregations in the John Calvin Presbytery (JCP). The first was at the February 24, 2024, Presbytery meeting. Small group learning time involved participants openly discussing and acknowledging concerns over both pastor shortages and declining membership. A brief JCP Connection questionnaire was completed addressing pressing congregational challenges and awareness of new church leadership models. (See attached February 24<sup>th</sup> questionnaire.)

The second event on March 16, 2024, was a Practical Tools for Ministry workshop convened by JCP in conjunction with the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, and the Board of Pensions of the PC(U.S.A.). The event was designed for church members, ruling elders, CREs, and pastors to explore practical tools and resources for preparing sermons, leading worship, visiting the sick, and leading educational experiences. The gathering was to assist churches large and small, urban and rural, to meet existing challenges by building confidence and empowering lay individuals to more actively “be the church” in a changing world. A similar brief JCP Connection questionnaire was completed by participants. (See attached March 16<sup>th</sup> questionnaire.) Responses from both questionnaires were collected and tallied.

### **Response Details and Possible Uses and Applications:**

February 24<sup>th</sup> questionnaire responses were collected from 31 of 65 attendees representing 14 congregations.

March 16<sup>th</sup> questionnaire responses were collected from 24 of 67 attendees representing 9 congregations.

\*Note: There were no duplicate respondents between the events meaning that overall responses between the two events came from 55 members representing 23 congregations. (See attached list of congregations represented.)

### Questionnaire Responses from Most to Least:

- |  |    |
|--|----|
| 1. I would like more information about different church models (see page 1).     | 19 |
| 2. How can we connect with youth and adults?                                     | 17 |
| 3. What will we do without a pastor?   | 16 |
| 4. I would like to have more information about Commissioned Ruling Elders (CREs) | 15 |
| 5. How can we share worship electronically within copyright laws?                | 13 |
| 6. How can we provide music without an accompanist?                              | 12 |

During the February 24<sup>th</sup> event, small group participants provided the following suggestions for how small churches can carry out the great ends of the church (Book of Order G 1.02):

1. The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind: Relationship building within the community; supper club fellowship and Bible discussions – the group grows as friends are invited;

making the church building available for other groups; church members volunteering for community projects; all kinds of mission projects; newspaper columns or blogs; finding ways to provide social capital for those who are marginalized (after-school tutoring or latch key programs); offer Bible studies; program to pay off student lunch debt; blankets or sleepers for newborns; food pantry with no proof of need; have a church booth at community events; give away water and take prayer requests; follow through on praying; witness to others about Jesus the Savior; have a session member tell their faith message during worship (3-4 minutes).

2. The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God: Spiritual fellowship – we visit the sick, homebound, hospitals, nursing homes, homebound, and bring the presence of Christ; provide online worship for those who cannot attend; daycare groups within the church; care groups within the church to provide meals, transportation, etc.; ministry of the casserole; build God-centered friendships; be mindful of cliques forming; work on including others – even during worship; sit with others and not just with close friends; participate in Bible studies with others; strive for a warm and friendly congregation – like a family; help other congregations that are struggling – they need nurture and help with bigger conversations and it’s okay to talk about it; have conversations about being aware that the past isn’t always the future and things are done differently in changing times; talk about and plan how to do things differently; learning to be faithful about “being the church.”
3. Maintenance of divine worship: Is our worship more nostalgic than divine? Arrange to have healing services from time to time; allow for silence; slow up the usual parts of worship and take time to focus on meanings rather than recitation: Lighting of the candles, Lord’s Prayer, Apostles Creed, Gloria Patri, Confession of Sins, Assurance of Pardon; Music is very spiritual – find ways to have music even if you don’t have an accompanist; if you can’t play the music, say the words together; divine worship includes communion – if your church doesn’t have a pastor prepare other ways to have communion; prepare and train congregations to use alternative models of pastoring and to learn ways to develop ruling elders to lead.
4. The preservation of the truth: Jesus embodies the truth, and his truth sometimes challenges our human ideas. We must live the truth of the word of God, especially in our community and in our interactions with society at large.
5. Promote social righteousness: Poverty, homelessness, addictions, domestic violence, gun violence, child abuse and neglect, shortage of affordable or adequate housing, underfunded public education, what to do to humanize those who are different from the norm, how to discern the right and wrong way of viewing migrants as being less loved by God. Author and Reverend Phil Blackburn pointed out in his session that the church has access to social capital. We know of people in the community and a multitude of resources to help the downtrodden find refuge, resources, safety, and hope. Phil reminds us that through Christ we have more influence than we can imagine.

6. Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world: Go and be the love of Jesus; imagine what the world would be like if God was in control of our lives. Imagine it, and then try to live like that. Examples: food, dedication, sharing, quilt making projects, acceptance of each other's differences, harmony and diversity within the congregation, forgiveness rather than bitterness, willingness to be flexible and try new things, generosity without strings or expectations, going outside of our comfort zones to help others. "I once served a yoked church. We were small but wanted to 'be' the love of Jesus. Our building sat right across from the funeral home. We provided a funeral dinner for anyone who would ask. No matter who, we fed them."

Additional suggestions to help meet identified church challenges include the following:

- Focusing future Presbytery small group education time on the identified topics.
- Modeling new methods during Presbytery meetings such as music without a live accompanist or other alternative music sources, taping worship within copyright law and explaining what that involves, providing CREs opportunities to participate and discuss their experiences with the Dubuque program and or how it translated to their congregational leadership, etc.
- Creating train-the-trainer teams on the identified topics to hold smaller regional meetings around the Presbytery.
- Creating written or videoed workshops to post on the JCP website.
- Emailing session clerks, pastors, and Presbyterian Women with information for congregational discussions.
- Developing possible workshop partnerships with Dubuque or other organizations on these specific topics.
- Disseminating information about resources such as scholarships for CREs, training for ruling elders and communion, etc.
- Developing and disseminating Presbytery-approved guidance on copyright law and the provision of electronically shared worship or use of other music sources. Post on the JCP website.
- Making videos or handouts of any of these topics for posting on the JCP website to be easily accessible to churches seeking resources.

## References

- Blackburn, P. (February 2024). The great ends of the (small) church. *The Presbyterian Outlook*. Pres-outlook.org.
- Brekke, G. (February 2024). Doing more with less: Smaller pc(usa) congregations face new leadership realities. *The Presbyterian Outlook*. Pres-outlook.org.
- Burton, C. N. (January 2024). The future of the pc(usa) is pastor-less, and that's ok. *The Presbyterian Outlook*. Pres-outlook.org.