

On the values of conciliarism, devolved vs. centralized power and grass roots participation  
in our Presbyterian form of church government  
(based on a statement of the Committee on Church Doctrine contained in the 2010 A&P)

We believe that faith and order are intimately related. What we believe affects the way in which we order the life of the church, and the way in which we govern ourselves affects our doctrine. One characteristic of Presbyterian Church government is that it is non-hierarchical and thoroughly egalitarian, giving each church officer an equal vote. Any diminution of the involvement of ministers and elders makes the church less democratic and goes against the essential nature of our Presbyterian polity. Another significant quality of our form of polity is that it moves from bottom to top and then from top to bottom; that is, from the local congregation to General Assembly by a series of church courts and then from Assembly back down to the local congregation by way of synod, presbytery and session. Any centralization of power, moves further away from the “grass roots” of our church, making our system top-heavy, accentuating the movement from top to bottom at the expense of the movement from bottom to the top. A great strength of the Presbyterian order of government is the fact that it is by definition conciliar. Regular and frequent meetings as a community are of the essence in what it means to be Presbyterian. We fulfill this indispensable aspect of our character as we “take counsel together” at session, presbytery and synod meetings. Gathering together as the whole church is very valuable in keeping this conciliar spirit strong in our church, particularly in these days of creeping congregationalism within our denomination, and growing isolation and disconnectedness in the culture around us. The General Assembly is to an expression of the church’s unity. The gathering of one sixth of the ministers and an equal number of representative elders, as well as the presence of young adult representatives and ecumenical visitors, contributes to the experience of the unity of our church whose membership is scattered across a huge country where there is great cultural diversity, and where little other opportunity is provided to experience the church as a whole. Some of the dynamics of meeting together results cannot be measured statistically -- they have to do with the work of the Holy Spirit in and through our gatherings for business, prayer, and worship. It is in our face to face meetings where we learn truly to love one another and to love our church, and to understand what it means to be the Church of Jesus Christ in all its length and breadth.

Remarks of the Rev. Dr. Clyde Ervine to the 2012 General Assembly  
concerning the priority of congregations in God's economy for the church

Over the years, I have attended a number of General Assemblies and been repeatedly impressed and moved by the breadth and depth of the ways we are missionally engaged as a national church. It is a privilege to be a minister in this denomination. I am proud of its people and I’m a passionate promoter of *Presbyterians Sharing* – the budget that supports such a wide range of ministries and mission.

That said, I want right now, in the context of the Life and Mission Agency report, to propose a radical reorientation of focus for our denomination. I’m here to plead that our central focus as a denomination be placed on congregations. For a very long time, within a Christendom paradigm, the presence of congregations has been assumed as a given, perhaps even taken for granted. As I read through the General Assembly reports prior to coming to this General Assembly, I found much of interest, yet I confess that I didn’t find a sustained focus on congregations as congregations. They are assumed.

## Congregations

1. In the New Testament, and in light of Jesus' ministry, the earliest disciples, empowered by the Holy Spirit, began their mission. In Jerusalem and going out from there, they go out preaching Jesus. But to what end? The forming of local congregations.
2. Further, the documents we know as the New Testament were written largely to help those early congregations. Congregational formation, congregational edification, congregational health, and congregational mission are the reasons why the New Testament was written.
3. Within our own Reformed Tradition, the burning question among the early Reformers was this: Where is the church to be found? The classic answer given was that the church is present wherever the gospel is preached and the gospel sacraments are rightly celebrated. In other words the church is found in local, concrete, embodied communities called congregations.
4. I also suggest that as a matter of history, it has been congregations for the last 2000 years that have been the primary bearers of the gospel from one generation to another. My conclusion: congregations constitute the basic, fundamental fabric of our denomination. But we too often assume that they will always be there.

We know, or perhaps need to be reminded, that fifty years ago The Presbyterian Church in Canada had 200,000 members in its congregations; today the number is 100,000. Fifty years ago, The Presbyterian Church in Canada had 100,000 in its congregations' Sunday schools; today it is 17,000. This reality casts a shadow over the work of the denomination and of this Assembly. But it seems to me this has not yet moved us seriously to give a nationally sustained focus to congregations *as congregations*. Congregations themselves and presbyteries, and to some extent synods, pay attention to congregations. But it is at the national, General Assembly level that I plead for a radical reorientation of our priorities.

What might a primary focus on congregational vitality look like? I suggest that it means a vast emphasis on making disciples. The formation of congregations in New Testament times arose out of the fact of Jesus, crucified and risen. Claiming all authority in heaven and earth, Jesus told his earliest disciples, "Go make disciples". Those well known words of commission need to be burnt into the national consciousness and practice of our denomination.

"Go make disciples". The commission is based christologically on the crucified and risen Jesus. But the commission needs to be expressed ecclesologically, as it is in the New Testament, in the creation of congregations, which in turn, according to the New Testament, are meant to embody and express the values of the kingdom of God.

To make disciples begins with evangelism, an evangelism that challenges post-Christian, secular Canada with the claims of Christ. It's going to be hard; congregations feel intimidated by this challenge. Congregations need help in doing this from a national church that has decided, and that has it in its DNA, that congregations are primary. Congregations need help to exegete an unfriendly, even hostile context. Congregations need help to face the social and intellectual barriers in our society that challenge the gospel. Congregations need help through theological and practical resources that will enable them to understand, celebrate and share the gospel. But if evangelism is an invitation to discipleship, discipleship does not end there. To make disciples is to create and sustain congregations as counter-cultural communities that in concrete, local settings, follow a distinctive Lord, think in distinctive Christian ways, and live out distinctive kingdoms values. It's going to be hard.

For the greater part of our history as a denomination in Canada we have been part and parcel of the fabric of a Christian Canada. But our place in the nation has changed. We are no longer as welcome within the reigning cultural assumptions of our society - which is

why congregational life and growth are so difficult, and why so many clergy and congregations are so discouraged. As I look at the reports in front of us, and as I look at the Life and Mission Agency report, I wish that there was a greater focus on congregations as congregations. The particular section of the Life and Mission Agency Report that might be expected to focus on the congregation as congregation would be Canadian Ministries. But on reading that report I note that under the one umbrella of Canadian Ministries we have, as a denomination, placed our commitment to congregational worship, congregational evangelism, congregational Christian Education, congregational Youth Ministry, and congregational development and leadership, all under the mandate of one associate secretary. I have to conclude from this, that at a national level, sadly, we are not at this time serious about the fundamental fabric of the denomination, congregations, and about the fundamental calling of the church – to make disciples.

We need a radical reorientation of our priorities. It's going to be hard. If we were as a General Assembly to commit ourselves nationally to placing a primary and central focus on congregational vitality, it will involve tough, courageous choices in the use of limited resources. Yet not just because I want The Presbyterian Church in Canada to survive (and I do) but because of a desire to be faithful to biblical patterns and principles, I move that the 138th General

Assembly go on record as giving priority to the reimagining and renewal of our congregations and ask the Life and Mission Agency to consider how new energy and resources may be focused on congregational vitality, and that the Life and Mission Agency share the mind of this Assembly with the Assembly Council as the latter develops a new national mission and vision statement.

The Cook/Howard additional motion at the 2014 General Assembly re: a vision statement for the PCC. This motion (amended by Clare to include point 5) garnered the support of Assembly following the defeat of the vision statement proposed by Assembly Council

That we remember, reaffirm and carry forward the strong statement made by the 138th General Assembly regarding the importance of local congregations (A&P 2012, pp.44-46) and that we would do so in the following ways

**1. That we declare that a clear and critical priority as a denomination is to renew equip and inspire local congregations and missions to fulfill the Great Commission and the Great Commandment to the glory of the Triune God.**

2. That this priority be incorporated into the mandates and/or job descriptions of all agencies, national committees and national staff.

3. That this priority be used by all agencies national committees and national staff as a regular and critical element of ongoing self-evaluation and the evaluation of any staff members, committees and or agencies under their oversight.

And

4. That all agencies and national committees be directed to regularly include an appropriately thorough written summary of the insights and results of these ongoing evaluations at future general assemblies, And

5. That the AC present a strategic plan at the next general assembly.