

THE ODYSSEY GROUP: Report to Presbytery #1

The Odyssey Group is now meeting every 1st and 3rd Thursday (except when we meet other days ☺). We have contracted with Rev. Jill Hudson as consultant for the group. Jill is Director of Middle Governing Body Relations for the GAC/OGA. She has been involved in denominational youth ministries, spent 15 years on the staff of the Synod of Lincoln Trails, was Executive Presbyter in Whitewater Valley Presbytery for 14 years, has been an active Alban Institute consultant for 25 years, is a credentialed “coach”, and is the author of several books on church life, including a classic guide for churches experiencing trauma and two on evaluating pastoral leadership (one of which was used by the committee that did Steve’s five year review). The group’s first meeting with her will be March 12th. In addition to being available for coaching for the group, she will return for at least two more sessions with the group.

Early meetings focused on getting to know the members of the group and review and refining the group’s task:

Our Task: (Review)

- ☞ Articulating a missional vision for our Presbytery
- ☞ Reframing Presbytery goals in alignment with that missional vision•
- ☞ Shaping the Presbytery system to support that vision and goals
- ☞ Engaging our peers in the process so that we together will share the outcomes.

Our first area of attention will be to “shaping the Presbytery system”. (And then we will revisit the presbytery vision and reshape the goals according to the intersection of vision and system).

Together we are exploring the key concepts of:

- ✓ System thinking.
- ✓ Technical and Adaptive challenges.
- ✓ Adaptive changes require a “shift” in all aspects of a system.

Steve led us on a discussion of Institutional Isomorphism of Presbyteries historically:

1. Constitutional/Theology Model
2. Corporate/Centralized Model
3. Regulatory Model (the one we are all most familiar with)...
4. (What next?) “Compelling not coercive...”“Protects the mystery, not insures the mechanism”

The group is engaged in reading a number of books and articles and invites the presbytery to join them in parallel reading.

Steve Yamaguchi’s D Min dissertation.

Anything by Ronald Heifetz (the group is reading several extracts from articles).

The Starfish and the Spider, By Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom

Governance as Leadership, Richard P. Chait, William P. Ryan and Barbara E. Taylor

The Transforming Church, By Kevin Ford

The following is an example of the kinds of reading/articles the group is using to help frame its thinking:

NAVIGATING TRAFFIC CONES. Rev Dr. Keith Geckeler

I recently heard an illustration that piqued my imagination in challenging ways. It comes out of systems theory and the search for the best way to enable organizations to function effectively.

A study was conducted using two groups of drivers on a closed test course. A series of cones was set up that would require drivers to weave in and out of the cones. One group received the instructions that they were to drive the course without hitting any of the cones. The other group was told to drive the course aiming for the open spaces between the cones. The first group hit cones 35% more often than did the second group.

I got to wondering how this might apply to congregations, presbyteries—and our denomination. If you think of the traffic cones as barriers, or obstacles, or conflicts and disagreements, some very interesting possibilities suggest themselves.

Our Presbytery is seeking to move toward becoming the kind of organization where people and congregations are encouraged to head toward the open spaces. Efforts have been made to move from a “regulatory” mind set to one where individuals and groups are supported for trying new ways of coming at problems; are helped to see how old answers don’t necessarily apply to new circumstances; are supported whenever a group of people with a vision for how God might be at work in today’s world comes to us and asks for assistance in pursuing that vision. Instead of focusing on reasons why something can’t or shouldn’t be done, we’re trying to move toward listening and asking “why not?”. Instead of seeing our role as pointing out the cones and telling people not to hit them and creating structures to keep people from hitting them, we’re asking what would happen if we moved toward looking for where the open spaces are and aiming for them.

I discovered this experiment put its finger on something that had been bothering me for 30 years of service to our church. A certain independent publication about our church tends to drive me nuts—but I could never really explain why. Now I can. It is all about pointing to cones and telling us not to hit them. It so focuses people’s attention on the cones, that they never notice the huge open spaces in between them. Not that cones don’t exist, but if that’s all you pay attention to, you will crash into more of them than if you spend your time driving through the open spaces. You’ll have to decide for yourself what you’re going to focus on—but I personally find that the open spaces are a lot more interesting in the long run.

Finally, it gives me a new tool for working with congregations. We have a lot of congregations which appear to have cones set up in two foot intervals. At least it seems like it given the number of complaints that keep coming from them; the number of times they ask for help because they can’t resolve the lowest priority problems; the way in which they excel in finding the speck in other peoples’ eyes. Over the years, the only term I’ve come up for such congregations is “toxic”. They are doing little for the spiritual or emotional health of most of their members and are so busy moaning and groaning that they have little energy left to listen for—let alone follow—God’s call for their individual or community lives. On the other hand, I know right away when I’ve walked into a congregation where the cones must be a mile or two apart. They are so busy exploring new options for ministry, new mission outreach, new ways of reaching people with the Gospel, that they don’t have much time left over to look for cones. People in these churches always seem to have a warm smile on their face and an even warmer greeting for strangers in their midst. The adults are so engaged in their own spiritual growth that they don’t have time to worry about the fact that the third grade teacher’s shoes are the wrong color. These are the places where when someone comes to the Session with a new mission idea, it doesn’t take 4 committees 9 months to decide there isn’t enough money in next year’s budget. Instead, they say “have at it”; if it is something God wants them to be doing, the people and the money will be there.

And finally, I recognized how my understanding of the office of Stated Clerk has evolved. My job is to know where the cones are so that everyone else can focus their vision and energy on the open spaces. You need to check in from time to time when you catch one of those cones in your peripheral vision—knowing that we’re going to talk about how what you are thinking of doing is consistent with the Gospel, faithful to Jesus Christ, and will bring glory to God. If so, then we’ll explore together how

the Constitution can help make that possible. On those few occasions when there is a cone in the road, it's usually there because the collective wisdom of the church has said it can be really dangerous if you hit it so avoid it if at all possible. So know that I'm always happiest when I can say "Yes".

On that note, I turn the musing over to you and hope this helps you take a fresh look at how you and your congregation and our Presbytery and our denomination are responding to the challenge of the cones and open spaces.