

## Crazy ideas

**Our church and the hurting world around us would benefit from a little more “craziness.”**

A few years ago a Presbyterian pastor in Long Beach, Calif., came up with what he thought was a “crazy idea.” Writer Toni Montgomery recounted what happened in an article published by Presbyterian News Service in April:

Pastor Steve Wirth stood up in front of Grace First Presbyterian Church one day and proposed that the church give away \$1 million to help Gulf Coast churches rebuild following Hurricane Katrina. Wirth wasn't sure how members would respond, Montgomery writes, “but he never anticipated what did happen when he finished his announcement: applause.” One elder told him, “I've never been prouder to be a member of this church.”

Not only did the 700-member congregation raise the money, they formed a partnership with tiny, struggling Berean Presbyterian Church in New Orleans and sent volunteer work crews to the region about 20 times.

My reaction to this story: Let's have more of these “crazy ideas.” Bring them on! The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), not to mention the hurting world around us, would benefit from a little more “craziness.”

We should pay attention to people like Brian D. McLaren, a popular author and leader in the “emergent church” movement, who spoke at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in March. He and others are calling for radically “new ways of being church” to meet the challenges of the 21st century. While we sit comfortably in our pews on Sunday morning, the church is becoming increasingly irrelevant to those who prefer to start their week at the local coffee shop.

New church models will not be imposed in a top-down manner, McLaren told his seminary audience, but will emerge from conversations, experiments (maybe even “crazy ideas”) percolating at all levels. Some of the new models of church he suggested— “disciple-forming communities” rather than self-preservationist institutions, for example—sound remarkably like the New Testament.

And wouldn't evangelism be more appealing, he wondered, if we defined it differently—not as a way of getting more bodies into church and souls into heaven, but as “God's way of recruiting people to join in the healing of the world”? McLaren concluded gleefully: “I bet a lot of people would get up and knock on doors for that.”

New models and crazy ideas offer hope to the growing number of Presbyterian congregations without pastors, the topic of our cover story on page 12. The early church “did it themselves,” says one quoted leader. They didn't have seminary-educated pastors or large financial resources. What they had were leaders who had sat at the feet of Jesus and were willing to follow him anywhere. They had members who were willing to contribute all their possessions toward spreading the gospel.

It may sound “crazy” to tell the 45 percent of Presbyterian churches without installed clergy that they don't all need pastors. But in trying out other leadership options, these congregations may model for the rest of us some new or even better ways of being church. □



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