

COMMITTEE ON PREPARATION FOR MINISTRY
Report to the Presbytery of Los Ranchos
November 17, 2011

The Committee on Preparation for Ministry (CPM) met today, and in accordance with action taken presents the following for action and information:

The following Annual Consultations have been approved by CPM. They have been continued as Inquirers or Candidates and a summary of the Consultations have been/will be sent to their session and seminary (where applicable).

Allison Becker, Candidate Malia Griffice, Candidate
Alex Wirth, Inquirer

CPM voted to recommend that Inquirer **Frank Padilla** be released from the Covenant Relationship per his request, without prejudice.

CPM voted to recommend that Presbytery examine and transfer **Alex Wirth**, a member of Grace First Presbyterian Church, Long Beach, from the status of Inquirer and to receive him as a Candidate.

“The Presbytery...shall examine the inquirer in person with respect to his or her Christian faith, forms of Christian service undertaken, and motives for seeking the ministry.”

The following are two (of six) statements required of Mr. Wirth in preparation for his CPM examination to move toward the candidacy phase.

1) A Statement of my understanding of Christian Vocation in the Reformed Tradition and how it relates to my call.

The Christian Vocation is to live on the Cutting Edge of Love. We are to be the best, the absolute best, at loving God with all our hearts, all our souls, all our strength, and all our minds. We are to excel at loving our neighbor as ourselves. But what does Love mean in our time? Our Christian Vocation is to spend time in prayer and in action to discern what the Cutting Edge of Love is.

The Model T was, in its day, the cutting edge of automotive technology. Henry Ford, for all his flaws and talents that history has revealed to us, steered his company to the cutting edge of car making. Ford discerned and acted upon his automotive vocation and did well. When Mainline churches built new buildings and added Christian education wings to embrace the swell of families in the wake of World War II, they were on the Cutting Edge of Love. The Church and its leaders discerned and acted upon their Christian Vocation and did well. Thanks be to God.

But to be on the cutting edge of anything is a precarious position. Some times you fall off. Sometimes you fall behind. Detroit is no longer on the cutting edge of car making. That edge shifted and US automakers missed the change. Car companies are now in the process of discerning their vocation, looking at new technologies and innovations to find that cutting edge again. We in the Church are in a similar place. Many Churches still stand where the Cutting Edge of Love *used* to be, not a bad place to be maybe, but it is clear that many of us have missed the shift in the Cutting Edge of Love.

The Cutting Edge of Love used to be building sanctuaries and growing numbers and we were good at it. But now, look at how often we squabble over our properties and despair over our falling numbers. This is not the cutting edge of anything. We have missed a shift in the Cutting Edge of Love. We need to reassess, in prayer and in community, what the Christian Vocation is—what the Cutting Edge of Love is. To risk straining my automotive metaphor here, we need to do some research into alternative fuels for the Church.

So here I am, not the first young seminarian to comment on the Church losing its way, and I wonder: what does this have to do with me? Is this my call? Is this what God has for me, to be a commentator on the

state of the Mainline Protestant Church in the US? Maybe a part of it, but this doesn't seem to be the Cutting Edge of Love either. The essential question persists: How do I live out my call to be on the Cutting Edge of Love as an ordained PCUSA minister?

My call to the Christian Vocation is to be on the Cutting Edge of Love within the Presbyterian Church while eating with tax collectors and outcasts, meth addicts and transgender prostitutes. In building relationships with outcasts, I hope to connect them to the deep compassionate tradition of the PCUSA. I want to help a ministry, be it a congregation, a service organization, or some other asymmetrical ministry, to reconnect with the Cutting Edge of Love. The clearest path back to that place that I can see is through serving others. On these, the least of these drowning in the shadows, I shine a light. A light that comes from Christ that leads us all back to the Cutting Edge of Love. The Cutting Edge of Love is that place we always end up at when we are tired. The place where we find ourselves just as we are thinking about getting out of the business of loving people, of loving God. Just as our heavy lidded eyes want to close we look up and realize that we are kneeling at the base of the Cross. We lay down our burdens in the dark wine colored mud there and we wait in prayer. We mull everything over and think about how we really don't deserve to be there and then... just then... our neck hair tingles or our mind races or we get goose bumps and we realize that we have heard God! We have seen it and felt it! The Cutting Edge of Love. And to this Christ says, "Good and faithful servant!"

That is where I am called to be. Right there in the mud at the base of the cross with all the other sinners who don't belong there like I don't belong there. All of us trying to figure out where the Cutting Edge of Love is as Christ defined it for us. All of us trying to figure out how to act out that Love as neighbors.

5) A statement of self-understanding which reflects my personal and cultural background and includes a concern for maintaining spiritual, physical, and mental health.

I've recently had a revelation in my self-understanding. About a month ago I adopted Pearl, a 75 lb Akita mix, from a local shelter. My big revelation, being a dog owner, is that I have become a sappy person! I've never shown any symptoms of sappiness in the past so I am a little bit at a loss. In the past I was staunchly against sappy things like speaking in baby talk to full-grown dogs and dressing dogs up in outfits. I thought of myself as a serious, pragmatic animal appreciator who disavowed any sort of pet silliness... until I started caring for Pearl. Now I am a sap of the highest order. I speak in a ridiculous singsong voice to her on the street in front of strangers. I spend time cooking special treats for her. I catch myself ogling cutesy stuffed toys to buy for Pearl even though I know she will just eviscerate them the first chance she gets.

This has taught me two things about myself. First, I have learned that love from a warm fuzzy dog can change my seemingly tightly held positions pretty quickly. Furthermore, taking care of Pearl has reminded me that even my most tightly held convictions could come into question in the face of another person's very real humanity. I can't walk past Pearl without pausing to scratch her head. How can I walk past a person in need and not be affected? Being affected by the needs of others amounts to more than just sappiness, it is an emotional openness that allows me to have compassion for my fellow humans (and dogs too.)

The other thing that I have learned is that it is ok to be sappy sometimes. It is tiring to constantly maintain high emotional walls. If I talk a little baby talk to my dog, does it make me any less serious of a human? No. If I let myself feel terrible about the bracing scale of human suffering, does it make me weak in some way? No. Pearl responds better when I speak in a higher pitched voice versus a low-pitched one. That's just how dogs' ears work. I think that's how the world works too. I think the world responds better to earnest emotion rather than demonstrations of force in the face of radical suffering.

So how do I take care of myself spiritually, physically and mentally? I take Pearl for walks and it keeps my physically healthy. I think of her needs before my own and it keeps me mentally healthy. I see the way she rolls over for belly rubs in front of me and it reminds me of how sometimes I need to roll over in front of God for a good belly rub and that keeps me spiritually healthy. Who could ask for anything more from a dog?