

Occasional Notes – October, 2018

It is the season of reviewing Session Records. Clerks from the churches in John Knox Presbytery have met or will be meeting to review the minutes and rolls and registers of the sessions they represent. This annual ritual has gone on far longer than I've been the stated clerk of the presbytery. Maybe some have wondered why we do this.

Presbyterians place a high value on accountability. That value is not just to make more work for clerks, but stems from some of our closely held beliefs. One of the "great themes of the Reformed Tradition," according to F-2.05, is "Covenant life marked by a disciplined concern for order in the church according to the Word of God...." That foundational belief shapes the organizational patterns of church for us.

Our emphasis on covenant life is part of the reason we are a connectional church. We believe that individual congregations alone "are not sufficient in themselves to be the church." (G-3.0101) Congregations are called to share with other Christians the ministry to which we are called. We are connected to each other in discipleship, ministry, and mission. We are connected to other churches and also to the more inclusive councils of the church (presbytery, synod, and General Assembly). "The particular responsibility of the councils of the church is to nurture, guide, and govern those who witness as part of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), to the end that such witness strengthens the whole church and gives glory to God." (G-3.0101)

Part of being in covenant relationship with other parts of the church to which we are connected is mutual accountability. Our Form of Government requires that the presbytery review annually the proceedings and actions of each session within its jurisdiction. Similarly, the Synod reviews the records of each presbytery within its jurisdiction and the General Assembly reviews the records of each synod. "In reviewing the procedures of the lower council, the higher body shall determine whether the proceedings have been correctly recorded, have been in accordance with this Constitution, have been prudent and equitable, and have been faithful to the mission of the whole church." (G-3.0108)

There are good things about reviewing those session records. It ensures that they are completed and printed on the archival paper at least once a year. (Some of us procrastinate, despite our best intentions!) In John Knox Presbytery clerks of session or their designees gather in regional groups for a couple of hours to exchange session records and review them according to a checklist. This time together provides clerks an opportunity to share ideas and best practices for the work they do and to learn from one another. Being a clerk of session is a particular ministry and meeting with others who do it provides support.

People I know from other denominations are surprised and sometimes amused by our Presbyterian preoccupation with keeping records and having them reviewed by a higher council. It is not just a fetish – it speaks of who we are as Presbyterians and some of the things we believe about God's covenant with us and our covenants with each other.

I am grateful for the good spirit and cooperation when clerks of session and others meet to review records. It is a time I value each year as I experience some of our connections at work and learn more about the ministries of the churches in John Knox Presbytery. This one manifestation of "Covenant life marked by a disciplined concern for order in the church according to the Word of God...." is working well in John Knox Presbytery. Thanks be to God!

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