

## Numbering My Worries

### *One Seminarian's Concerns for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

*By Emily Morgan*

A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to participate in an unusual event. Five or six church confirmation groups were brought together, mixed up, and split up again to study a Church Information Form (CIF) and perform mock interviews as a Pastoral Nominating Committee (PNC). Several ruling elders and I were brought in for the groups to interview for the pastoral position in each church. One of the groups I sat down with had a CIF that said the church's main priority was increasing membership numbers. When they asked what I would do to increase membership, I told them I was more concerned about cultivating relationships with the local community while living out the things Jesus told us to do. I added that church membership is not about getting people in the doors but about becoming the Body of Christ for the world. One of the youth gave me the blankest stare I have ever seen a teenager give, and the others at the table seemed just as perplexed.

This event makes me nervous because the youth were echoing the priorities of the CIF and frankly, the attitude they probably see in their own churches. Numbers, numbers, numbers. My entire life I have heard how the numbers in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are declining. Some claim all we need to do is get young families in the church and then the numbers will go back to what they were. Some claim we need to "save" the church. All I want to do when I hear people begin talking numbers like this is ask, "In a world where group membership has often been reduced to paying dues and showing up for social events, how can the church model a different way of being?" Here's the real question: "Are the numbers more important than living into the Gospel?"

Underlying this inclination to prioritize higher membership numbers is a toxic assumption: higher numbers mean success. In the secular market, success is measured by profitability: the more people who buy a product, the more successful it is. Are we in the church looking for profits or for prophets? Are we looking for secular success or Gospel success?

Jesus is so "successful" that he is *executed*. The Gospel Jesus preached and lived is about risky commitments that overturn expected norms (including economics). A life of discipleship is not about being comfortable or about ensuring an institution continues the way it "has always been." Just take a look at things Jesus said: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34). "Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me'" (Mark 10:21). "Take nothing for the journey, no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra tunic" (Luke 9:3). These ideas are echoed throughout the New Testament and church history: "Be not conformed to this world" (Romans 12:2). "Faith does not certainly promise itself either length of years or honor or riches in the life.... But [faith] is content with this certainty: that...God will never fail" (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* III.2.28).

The Gospel preached and lived into may, in the short term, produce fewer members, if 10-A (which opened the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to ordination of openly lesbian women and gay men) is any indication.

I honestly think we are fixating on membership numbers because they are concrete and easy to grasp. We can say that a church had three baptisms last year, eight people joined the church, one person died, an average of eighty-seven in worship with 75% of those regular attendees pledging. However, if we try to count lives transformed, love given, hope instilled, relationships grown, justice in process, and moments of God breaking into the world, the numbers suddenly become more difficult to calculate (not to mention, it is plainly more difficult to do those things); but *that* is ministry. The ministry of the *all* the members of the church is to be witnesses to God's transforming love as seen in Jesus and sustained by the Spirit.

Take a look around at the changing world. People are thirsty for community. The problem is often people do not know where to go in order to find the living water that will quench their thirst. I recently spoke with a college friend who is going through some difficulties, "Anna." Anna said she could not find meaning in her life after graduation. She was living with relatives while unable to find any employment other than part-time food service work. The dreams she had formed for her life during her college time—financial independence, an apartment of her own, continued educational opportunities, meaningful work—were disappearing. Knowing Anna had grown up going to church I asked if she had sought out a spiritual community. She said sadly, "Emily, I have no idea how to."

There is real longing out there in the world. Some, like my friend Anna, have the longing to find meaning. Others long to be free from mental illness or addiction. Others long for justice and righteousness to flow down like a roaring river. Others have the longing simply to be seen as the beautiful child of God they may or may not know they are. Churches can open their doors, worship can happen, Bible studies can meet, casseroles can be baked; but if the church is not reaching out, and in, to those deep, longing, hurting places... we are not the church. You may be thinking, "It is easy enough for a seminarian to say such things. Your entire life is ministry." However, one does not need to be ordained or in seminary in order to sit with those who mourn, walk with those on a painful journey, or help someone struggling with intellectual issues of faith.

Yes, there is a concrete reality. I am in seminary and would love a full-time ministry position after I graduate. I have student loans to repay, food to buy, shelter to put over my head, a car to maintain; but I am scared. What I have seen over my almost three years at seminary is people graduate and struggle to find work, equitable compensation, recognition of their job as a validated ministry, churches involved in social justice, and people willing to transform their idea of what church can be. Many have not found full-time ministry positions, but they are still ministering whether or not they are getting paid for it. Then there are all the people who go to church and are ministering in their everyday lives, whether or not they consider it ministry. Ministry is loving people as best we can with God's help. That bag of fair trade coffee you bought? That is ministry. That person you advocated for who was unfairly being discriminated against? That is ministry. That time you put your arm around someone who was upset even when

you did not know what they were upset about? That is ministry. Being a Christian is not about being nice. Being a Christian is about loving acts of kindness done in the name of Jesus. I am not called to church leadership in order to increase a church's membership role. I am called not only to follow Jesus in my own life but to empower others to follow Jesus better. I believe I follow Jesus best in a life that includes church membership with all the duties and joys that brings. Church membership brings accountability and community, and we are all called to community and to be the Body of Christ. So when we are conceiving plans for church growth or revitalization, let us not fall into the easy and worldly tactics of just increasing membership numbers. Can we think bigger, deeper, more long-term? There are too many consumer products out there, and the church is not a place to think of profits. It is a place to look for prophets and expect the Holy Spirit's movement.