


**FAST
CHAT**

Patrick Heery

Leading by listening

Patrick Heery grew up in the Presbyterian Church and was ordained as a ruling elder while still a teenager. Just a week after graduating from Princeton Theological Seminary in May 2011, he began a job as social witness associate for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s Advisory Committee on Social

Witness Policy. He played a major role in the October 2011 launch of *Unbound*, an online interactive journal of Christian social justice (www.justiceunbound.org). Two months later, after affirming Heery's work as a "validated ministry," the Presbytery of Scioto Valley (central Ohio) ordained the 27-year-old as a teaching elder. Heery chatted with Gail Strange, a communications associate for the Presbyterian Mission Agency.

Many young adults leave the church once they go off to college. Why have you remained active in the PC(USA)?

During confirmation, we were required to attend worship services of other denominations and faiths. That told me that this is a church that values God more than it does itself, a church that would rather have me go somewhere else if so called than mindlessly become a Presbyterian. I felt respected and valued as a thinking person. And that, above all, has kept me Presbyterian.

A VOICE FOR CHANGE: Patrick Heery says churches should listen to young adults, invite them to take leadership roles and give them the power to change things.

How did you get involved in working for social justice?

In high school I desperately wanted to make a difference. I helped a woman run for the first time for city council on a platform of reconciliation and justice. I worked really hard on that campaign. But when the election results came back, every incumbent was reelected; nothing changed. I asked God, "Why wasn't it enough?" My answer was that we had addressed the politics, but not the people. We had not taken the time to listen. And it was in that moment that I realized that God was calling me to walk hand in hand with others to help restore and repair people, their lives and the system that so often breaks them.

What is the mission of Unbound?

Unbound is chiefly about listening. It provides a platform for people to share their stories as a call to collective action. Many of our writers are young people passionate about Jesus and social justice. We meet online to share our voices, stories, questions and critiques and models of ministry and activism. In less than a year, *Unbound* has reached over 20,000 individuals. I have heard from people who are revisiting a discarded faith after discovering a social witness they believed forsaken by the church.

How do you see your work (as managing editor of Unbound) as a ministry?

I preach the Word, but from a website. I witness and enable others, through articles and resources, to witness to the new reality under Jesus Christ and to the moral implications of that new reality. My e-ministry does not take place in a vacuum: I visit congregations and campuses, preach and participate in worship. We have supported churches in Cincinnati as they organized to protect safe and



affordable housing for women. We brought together students in California to discuss indigenous land rights. We have begun resourcing a network of seminarians committed to justice. I hear all the time from young people who are excited to have a forum for their voices and to see a ministry integrating justice and new media.

Are Presbyterian seminaries preparing young adults to take on leadership roles?

Yes and no. Presbyterian seminaries are very good at teaching biblical exegesis, theology, history and pastoral care. However, I'm not sure they are equally good at preparing seminarians to be leaders in their communities. The exception is field education. Two of my most transformative experiences were my field-education placements as a prison chaplain and as a faith-based community organizer in a local church.

Any advice on getting more young adults involved in the church?

Invite them to take a leadership role. Ask them what they want. Listen to them. The problem is that many churches are terrified of what would happen if young people were given the power to change things. But young people are not just sitting on the sidelines, waiting. We are starting our own ministries, utilizing new communication and media tools, forging a greener and more inclusive church defined more by its people than by its walls. The question is whether these new ministries will be given a place in the PC(USA). My presbytery took a chance and ordained me to an unusual ministry. That gives me hope.