

Protagonist Corner

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The 2013 Pastoral Letter project among North Carolina Presbyterians had its genesis during a summer lunch conversation among clergy friends, though none of us envisioned such an undertaking at the time. Ron Shive, who serves the First Presbyterian Church of Burlington, Chris Tuttle, of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Durham, and I were having the kind of conversation pastoral colleagues often have in such seasons—family vacations, funerals and weddings, church programs—when our discussion turned to the front-page news of the day.

The papers in June 2013 were full of reports of the actions of our state's General Assembly in the areas of voting rights, public education, and programs benefitting the poorer citizens of the state. They were also paying attention to the growing public protests of the Assembly's actions, the "Moral Mondays" evolving under the leadership of William Barber, a Goldsboro pastor and president of the North Carolina State Conference of the NAACP. We had all witnessed the swell of public animus on all sides of the issues before the Assembly.

Our threesome was sympathetic with the concerns raised by the Moral Monday protests. Two of us had attended one or more of the Monday gatherings. We were troubled about the effects of some of the legislation already passed and some still in proposal stage. At the same time, we wondered aloud if there might be a way to engage the state's legislators in conversation beyond the confrontation of the Monday protests. Toward that end, we resolved to meet again in mid-summer and to invite some of our pastor friends to join the conversation.

We scheduled a second meeting several weeks later in Durham and were joined by a dozen pastors from around the state. We invited their perspectives regarding the legislative agenda, and we asked about the prospects of engaging the legislators. We learned that an ecumenical group of Charlotte pastors had already initiated such a conversation with members of the General Assembly, but that they had called off the conversations when the talks ended in verbal stalemate.

Given the likelihood that further attempts at engagement would be met with similar results, the gathered group rallied around the idea of a pastoral letter, one that would give expression to the concerns all of us shared and garner as many pastors' signatures as possible. In the weeks following and in advance of a subsequent meeting, I circulated a draft of a rather robust letter of protest. That draft, designed for release around the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington in August, spoke of a long-standing commitment to the common good and said that the actions of the General Assembly had undercut such commitments, likely leading to "further significant disadvantages for vulnerable constituencies that already contend with poverty and discrimination." The draft noted that people of faith could disagree about particular legislation, then added:

But surely we can all acknowledge that the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Gospels compel us to work for justice for those who live under the crippling weight of poverty. Surely we can affirm God's compelling

vision of a just and fair society as expressed by the Hebrew prophets. Surely we all can grasp the power and intent of the prophet Isaiah's words, "Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and rob my oppressed people of justice" (Isaiah 10:1-2, NIV). Surely we can all agree with Jesus' compelling call to his disciples to extend care and compassion to the least and the lost. As Presbyterians, surely we can echo the affirmation of *The Confession of 1967* that, "the members of the church are emissaries of peace and seek the good of all in cooperation with powers and authorities in politics, culture, and economics. But they have to fight against pretensions and injustices when these same powers endanger human welfare (9:25)."

When we gathered again in Durham to discuss the draft, some expressed concerns about the letter's tone, given that we were in agreement that we wanted as many signatures as possible. We began to consider writing a pastoral letter to our own congregations rather than a letter of protest to the state's leaders. We commissioned a writing group to re-write the letter, and we asked another group to develop a curriculum that would help congregations engage the issues the letter would raise.

We completed the final draft of the letter during a spirited and thoughtful conversation in Burlington a few weeks later. The tone of the final letter was more irenic and invitational. We still stressed the common good and our concerns about legislative actions, but the paragraph cited above morphed into the following:

Grounded in our unity in Christ, we believe we have an opportunity to model a more excellent way forward amidst our social and political diversity, engaging with one another in mutual forbearance. Acknowledging that the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian gospels compel us to work for justice for those who live under the crippling weight of poverty, we invite you to explore how God's compelling vision of a just and fair society might become more manifest today. As Presbyterians, how might we follow Jesus' call to his disciples to extend care and compassion to the least and the lost? How might we, today, affirm the Confession of 1967 when it says, "The members of the church are emissaries of peace and seek the good of all in cooperation with powers and authorities in politics, culture, and economics (9:25)?"

In the end, 150 Presbyterian pastors, educators, and church leaders from all parts of the state chose to sign and distribute the letter. In so doing, they invited their congregations into an important conversation and study about faith and political realities. We do not know how many congregations actually used the letter or the excellent curriculum that Pen Peery and Suzanne Watts Henderson developed, but anecdotal conversations lead us to believe that a good number of church communities engaged these issues in some very constructive ways. Protest might have been more emotionally satisfying, but we are hopeful, indeed confident, that those conversations will continue to bear fruit.

Protagonist Corner, continued

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I was invited into the group that wrote the Pastoral Letter in the summer of 2013 through my wrestling with the headlines in the newspaper, my conversations with parishioners, and the encouragement of my colleagues in ministry, Bob Dunham and Chris Tuttle. I came to the project somewhat reluctantly. To be sure, I had concerns with the laws being passed in our state's General Assembly. The pace and scope of the policy changes troubled me, but what was more concerning was the fact that the people in North Carolina who would be most affected by these changes were the ones who were already the most vulnerable. Still, making the two-hour drive from Charlotte to Durham, I was hesitant because in the wake of the issues at hand, I watched—once again—the predictable battle lines being painted in red and blue.

What good comes when the church falls in place behind already defined and partisan boundaries? As a pastor, preacher, and leader in the Church of Jesus Christ, how can my voice that (hopefully) proclaims the gospel penetrate the fortress of carefully crafted sound bites and talking points? As someone who takes delight in serving a congregation that is distinctive in the theological and political breadth of its membership, how can I continue to model what it means to be faithful in my convictions as well as humble enough to know that I come to those convictions in part because I am steeped in, and formed by, the same hyper-partisan culture that I disdain?

Conflicted, I joined with my sisters and brothers in ministry while we prayed, listened, encouraged, and challenged one another. We agreed to meet again. As I drove back to Charlotte, I prayed a prayer of thanksgiving; this kind of dynamic interaction reveals the value of a ministry that is connectional. These kinds of conversations are where the Holy Spirit takes the sometimes mundane and overly institutional practice of ministry and transforms it into something holy and actionable and real.

When we gathered again, the group had greater clarity. The way we needed to lead was to help change the narrative, to elevate the discourse. To that end some of the group drafted the letter that Bob describes above. Another group of us set out to model what this “most excellent way” might look like through a curriculum that spoke the gospel into the lives of those in our congregations who found themselves confronted with the always ambiguous reality of life and faith in a political landscape.

Working with colleagues, we decided that the most effective medium for study would be a four-part video series that would provoke discussion and that could be easily viewed in a variety of settings. I approached the Reverend Dr. Suzanne Watts Henderson, a New Testament Professor at Queens University in Charlotte, North Carolina, to author the video series after reading a review of her new book, *Christ and Community: The Gospel Witness to Jesus*. A Markan scholar, Dr. Henderson's primary interest was in considering the ethical implications for the reign of God that Jesus proclaimed in the midst of the political realities of Palestine.

We worked to produce the four-part video curriculum in time for Lent, and we released the series on Vimeo, a website that is accessible to any and all who are interested. Bob Dunham contacted the 150 leaders who had signed the Pastoral Letter

to encourage them to use the video curriculum, which included a study guide written by Dr. Henderson, that was broken into the following four, twenty-minute sections:

Session One: What is the Kingdom of God?

Session Two: What is the Good News?

Session Three: What is Messianic Power Sharing?

Session Four: What is the Passion of Christ?

(<https://vimeo.com/channels/jesuschristinc>)

While we have no way of knowing exactly how many churches engaged this study, the videos have been played over 300 times by unique users. In my own congregation, we partnered with a neighboring, historically African American congregation to watch the videos and engage in conversation. First United Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church met for four weeks in the spring taking turns hosting a luncheon after worship on Sunday morning. My experience of these conversations was that they were lively and well received. Some of those who participated finished the study and wanted to move to advocacy around issues of funding for public education and voter access. Others simply relished the chance to sit and talk with fellow members and Presbyterians about how scripture and their faith came to bear on the lives they led outside the church walls.

What changed the narrative for those of us who gathered in uptown Charlotte were two things: (1) that we gathered together for a meal and (2) that the conversation *started* with scripture and then moved to the vexing issues of the day. I am not sure if the opinions of those in the room shifted, but I do know that people thought more deeply about what it means for us to be called into partnership with the living Christ in the unfolding reign of God. And I know that people in my pews appreciated that their church had provided them with a space—and a different way—to explore the issues facing our state and its citizens.

For the 75 people who participated in our study and the 300 other individuals or communities who joined us through their viewing of the curriculum, I am of the conviction that their experience and participation in this kind of theological reflection was more transformative than an experience of reading their pastor's work in an op-ed piece in a newspaper or a blog post. I hope this kind of wider participation might sow more seeds of the kingdom.

A Pastoral Letter

“Just as you did it to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.”
Matthew 25:40

As teaching elders of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we are bound to the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, the witness of Scripture, and the Confessions of the Church as the foundations of our ministry. These root sources instill in us the importance of compassion, fairness, and justice in the church, our personal lives, and the public realm. An enduring principle of our discipleship is the call to sacrifice for the sake of others after the manner of Christ and a commitment to the common good

beyond our own personal interest.

Within our Presbyterian and Reformed tradition, concern for the common good has focused on providing quality public education, ensuring affordable health care, and promoting the general welfare of the people with particular attention to those whom Jesus called “the least of these.” As church leaders in North Carolina, we are particularly concerned that recent legislative actions may undercut these commitments and lead to greater disadvantages for the most vulnerable among us who already contend with poverty and diminished opportunity.

Informed people of faith can disagree about particular legislative decrees. We know that we live in a time of division, when political and social issues threaten to split apart our communities, our nation, our state, and even our religious bodies. Grounded in our unity in Christ, we believe we have an opportunity to model a more excellent way forward amidst our social and political diversity, engaging with one another in mutual forbearance. Acknowledging that the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian gospels compel us to work for justice for those who live under the crippling weight of poverty, we invite you to explore how God’s compelling vision of a just and fair society might become more manifest today. As Presbyterians, how might we follow Jesus’ call to his disciples to extend care and compassion to the least and the lost? How might we, today, affirm the Confession of 1967 when it says, “The members of the church are emissaries of peace and seek the good of all in cooperation with powers and authorities in politics, culture, and economics (9:25)?”

We invite Presbyterians across North Carolina to join us as we pray for the poor, the overlooked, and the marginalized in our state. We invite our congregations to join us in study, prayer, and discussion around these matters. In a spirit of humility and boldness befitting Christ’s followers, let us renew our calling as advocates for the greater public good.