**State of the Presbytery Report**

November 2020

This report was shared by Melana Scruggs, General Presbyter, and Charmaine Ponkratz, Moderator of Steering Committee

*Melana:*

The vision, mission, and strategic goals need to guide any organization as it makes choices about where to use resources, volunteers, and staff. The actions of a church or presbytery should point people to understand their mission and goals. Too often, that is not the case. Many churches and presbyteries work hard on a vision, a mission statement, and a strategic plan, but they are then only part of the minutes, not a living, changing part of its life. We are taking time today to check in on the vision and strategic goals of this presbytery to see how we are doing living into them.

Charmaine will share some background about how this work was done.

*Charmaine:*

By way of background, in many ways today’s State of the Presbytery report reaches back to the work done a decade ago, in 2010, when a Guide Team led a process to answer the question: “who is God calling us to be?” Two years later a Vision was adopted, and in 2017 a Strategic Review Team was engaged to assess our progress and chart a road map for the future which this body adopted in 2018. Today, we’ll use that road map which added a strong VALUES statement and seven priorities to focus our work.



VISION: we believe God is calling us as a presbytery to assist and support congregations, connect disciples in mission and be the Body of Christ together.

VALUE: Affirm a culture that nurtures joyful and caring relationships as we learn to do God’s work together.

Melana is going to take the baton back and offer a view of the first of those priorities.

*Melana:*

The search team made this value of nurturing a strong relational foundation clear as they talked with me about the needs of the presbytery and the skills of its new General Presbyter. It is my belief that presbytery exists to facilitate the mission and ministry of its churches, pastors, and leaders. That requires trust, communication, listening, and relationship building. My primary goals as I began this work in November 2019 were to meet pastors, visit churches, listen to what the call from God was in each place, and begin to find ways for the presbytery to facilitate and support those callings. Before the shut-down in March, I managed to attend worship, special events, or meetings in 24 of our 37 churches. I also went to the annual meetings of Beth-El and Cedarkirk, went on a tour of the Westminster Homes facilities in Bradenton, and met with our Board of Pensions and Presbyterian Foundation reps. My goal was to understand the mission priorities of the Presbytery. Then we had to close all our buildings, and everything happened on Zoom. I have been able to worship with all but two congregations virtually and have enjoyed the creativity and variety of these experiences.

1. **Support Pastors**

Pastors have worked so much harder in these months than most people understand. Many had to become adept at videography, editing, publishing, and other things that they were not trained to do. Pastors have had to learn how to do pastoral care from afar, which is so foreign to them. There has been a lot of grief over opportunities lost and fear over whether people will return. Weekly pastor calls have allowed those who could attend find encouragement, support, and new ideas. These calls have been the highlight of the last eight months for me – a way to get to know pastors and to develop collegial relationships. I hope to continue some form of these opportunities even after COVID is done.

The resource page, created separately from the presbytery website for quick response, was initially a space for information on COVID, the CARES Act, and other fast changing news. It has become a place where others have shared ideas, policies, worship opportunities. I hope to continue this resource page as a way to share best practices, continuing education opportunities, creative worship plans, and other types of resources.

Several sermons and entire worship services have been provided so that pastors could take time for renewal and rest. A few churches have taken the Zoom meeting format and turned it into a way to have Bible study together.

1. **Equip Church Leaders**

In March and April there was so much information about COVID-19 that it was like drinking from a fire hydrant. Then came the CARES Act and again there was more than was possible to absorb. Sessions and pastors were making difficult decisions about when to close the sanctuary, whose advice to consider, which protocols to follow, and whether and how to apply for a loan that might become a grant. The resource page for the presbytery became a place to find information to help with decisions. Best practices from congregations were shared there and on some Zoom calls. Providing such information for churches to be able to do their ministry is what the Presbytery is called to do.

The Blessing Grants deadline was moved later because churches were making so many adaptations so quickly that there was little time to think about the long-term future of mission. But we are excited today to award three Blessing Grants for work that will impact the community outside the church doors.

As churches closed their physical doors, but not the church, it became clear that many needed technologies to help them provide quality live-streaming worship for those who were not able to join worship in person. The sale of the Lorraine Rd. property that had been bought by the presbytery as a possible site for Peace Church, sold – in God’s perfect timing. The Steering Committee decided to set aside enough money for all 37 churches in the presbytery to receive up to $10,000 to purchase the equipment necessary to share their message virtually. At this point, twelve churches have received checks totaling over $110,000 and another six are in the pipeline for equipment to share Christ’s message in a virtual world. The presbytery received a grant from the Synod for this program that has allowed us to provide subscriptions to the Worship Design Studio for churches at 1/3 the usual cost. We thank the Synod for their commitment to the connectional church and to the future of worship.

*Charmaine:*

1. **Improve Communications**

The adversity of COVID has taught us to use communications technologies that likely would have taken YEARS, not months to adopt. Thanks to the Communications/Connection/Community Team for figuring out this new Presbytery meeting format. We have work to do in this area and are fully aware of it. In a brainstorming session at the start of the year ideas emerged to create more venues to promote interaction between pastors and churches --- around shared priorities and ministries. We struggle with the question: how can we collect and share best practices? If you hear God calling you to be a person to make progress on this front, please contact Melana or our co-moderators of the Communications/Connection/Community team.

1. **Encourage greater diversity**

For the second year we have been informed of the work of a Representation Committee --- page D3 in your packet. To be sure, we cannot claim among our membership a diverse ethnic membership. But an important part of the story of this Presbytery is supporting the vulnerable in our work at Mision Peniel, in Immokalee and with Beth-el. Besides the support from our churches which is critical and for which we offer heartfelt appreciation --- we celebrate the support from the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance to both Mision Peniel and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in grants that ranged from $5,000 to $250,000 and provided support for a short-term response to the COVID crisis to the long-term solution for affordable housing for farmworkers. That $250,000 grant was for the Immokalee Fair Housing Alliance to begin work on the infrastructure for that project.

1. **Empower Outreach.**

Let me use this opportunity acknowledge our covenant partners and work done by our Teams to distribute money that donors had entrusted to the Presbytery to further the work of causes near and dear to their heart. There could be no better year than the chaos of 2020 to make distributions from the Hughey Fund to Cedarkirk (over $11,000). In the Finance Team report you see that they worked in concert with our Outreach and Nurture Team to distribute the Evans Fund and Young Memorial Fund to the Presbyterian Housing Foundation (over $8,000). These distributions were over and above the support for covenant partners receive from our churches; please share the story of the needs they are fulfilling in SW Florida and the appreciation we offer. We continue to look for ways to support our covenant partners.

1. **Prepare for Transition.**

This month marked the 1-year anniversary of our General Presbyter at the helm. Melana, we thank-you for canoeing the mountains with us. In our annual performance review process, which invited input from the leaders of every Team and Committee as well as staff, I read the overwhelming affirmation of your work.

Another transition was the streamlining of the committee and team structure. You will remember that the proposal took us from 177 committee/team member slots to 130 unduplicated slots. We’ll do a little back slide with returning the Cedarkirk representation back to 9 members, but the reduction is still noteworthy. And the roles of the teams have been clarified. But most important, the leaders and members of our teams have worked tirelessly to do the work of the Presbytery. I want to personally thank all of you who stepped up, stepped in and stayed on to do what God is calling us to do. But that is not the end of the story of transition, and for that I turn it back to Melana.

*Melana:*

We often like to pretend that there comes a time when we aren’t transitioning anymore. But if that were true, we would be dying. Let’s hope the transition never ends. We need to keep learning and growing as the culture changes, we need to adapt – we can’t use a canoe in the mountains, we have to learn a new way.

Most experts in church work agree that there will be a significant loss of pastoral leadership at the end of the COVID period, through earlier retirement or leaving the ministry. Peace River Presbytery already has nine churches in transition – that is ¼ of our churches. We need to be resilient and ready to support congregations in transition, which might mean doing things differently than we have before. Prepare for transition…

 **7. Create new and renewed worshipping communities and ministry models**

When we gathered a year (or 10) ago at Peace and I was installed as General Presbytery, we heard about the Vital Congregations initiative from General Assembly. The next cohort of that initiative will begin in June of 2021 and I hope that we will be part of that. It will include relationship building and learning about what it means to be the church now, an exciting opportunity for the presbytery.

There are places in our presbytery that are growing rapidly and in which we have no presence. There has been renewed interest in a possible worshiping community at Babcock Ranch. It would not be a bricks and mortar church, but a community of people coming together for service and worship, much like the early church. Please pray for the opportunities that we might find here, or in other places like Parrish or the West Villages. Presbyterians have a distinctive theology and view of the world to share.

For the last 8 months, the staff and I have been largely working from home. There are a few things that have not been convenient about that, but nothing has gone undone. It could be time to being a conversation about selling the presbytery office building. We could house a couple of offices and documents in rented space from a church. Meetings could be held in various churches in the presbytery. I can do my work from anywhere and did this for four years in my previous presbytery. Imagine what we might be able to do with the funds from the sale of that property for the work of churches in the presbytery.

These have been anxious, difficult, months – between COVID, economic uncertainty, racial conflict, and an unusual election, people have been stressed, unsure, needing comfort and strength. Jesus Christ calls us to be at the forefront with those who are vulnerable, with those who are oppressed, with those who are sick. This is an important time to be the church. Thank you for your work and your commitment to sharing the good news of hope and life in Christ.