

The Reformed Institute is offering a series of essays over the summer months to consider the state of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

### **Whither the PC(USA)?**

“Quo vadis, domine?” – “Whither goest thou lord?” This phrase from a book I read in high school came immediately to mind when I was asked to contribute to this discussion. There is an apocryphal story that Peter, fleeing Rome, met Jesus and asked him this question. When Jesus replied that he was going to Rome to be crucified again, Peter returned to Rome to complete the work he was doing there.

Another book that I read in high school also came to mind – *The Balance Wheel*. What I remember most is that the book ends on what seems to be a very hopeful note. Several generations of a family, the country, and the world have come through a variety of personal and financial crises, including the First World War. The youngest son of that family seems to be facing a bright future with the promise of prosperity and peace. However, we know that this child faces a future in which he will grow up during the Great Depression and will enter adulthood just in time to face the Second World War. We don’t know what will happen to him or to his family, but we do know they will all face challenges.

I think our church is on the brink of a time much like the times portrayed in what I remember of both of these books. We don’t know just what the future holds for us, but we do have many indications that there will be serious challenges. We have asked ourselves to make substantive changes in the way we live, worship, and work together. We are at a place and time that may be demanding that we return to – with perhaps a new way of addressing – the incomplete work that God has called us to do. I see this challenging time as a time for hope.

Why do I feel so hopeful? First and foremost because I trust in God; I trust God. Quoting from the Confession of 1967, I can fervently say:

“God’s redeeming work in Jesus Christ embraces the whole of [human] life. . . . Already God’s reign is present as a ferment in the world, stirring hope in [humankind] and preparing the world to receive its ultimate judgment and redemption. With an urgency born of this hope the church applies itself to present tasks and strives for a better world. It does not identify limited progress with the kingdom of God on earth, nor does it despair in the face of disappointment and defeat. In steadfast hope the church looks beyond all partial achievement to the final triumph of God.”

When those words were written our church and our country were coming out of one of those particularly challenging times. We came out of the 1960's with a renewed conviction that we were called upon to seek reconciliation for ourselves, our country, and our world through the reconciling work of Jesus Christ. This task is not complete, and we still acknowledge that it is a task we're called to undertake as we strive for that better world. Such perseverance is part of who and what we are. This gives us reason to hope as we face the challenges of today and tomorrow.

We all know that the PC(USA), along with most other denominations in this country, is faced with declining membership with no apparent end in sight. But in the midst of justified concern, I read in books like Greg Garrett's *The Other Jesus: Rejecting a Religion of Fear for a God of Love* and Diana Butler Bass's *Christianity For The Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith* that there are churches – in our denomination and others – that are thriving, that are going into the world baptizing and teaching the people to obey all that Jesus has commanded them, that are grace-filled places of joyful and healthy worship that are welcoming new congregants. These churches, in the words of our Brief Statement of Faith are places where

“The Spirit . . .  
sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor, and binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, . . .  
feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation, and calls women and men to all ministries of the church. . . .  
gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.”

There is reason to hope.

In our *Book of Confessions*, we in the PC(USA) remember with reverence and delight the traditions that have formed us and made us who and what we are today, while we still look to the future. In these creeds, confessions, catechisms, and statements of faith from the very earliest days of Christianity through the reunion of the northern and southern Presbyterian Churches in the late twentieth century we show ourselves to be a church and a tradition that learns from and uses what is good about the past, while acknowledging that the present and the future may require new insights in order to remain faithful to Jesus Christ.

I believe that this is one of the good things about the Reformed Tradition. We are faithful to the idea and the reality that we are reformed and always being reformed by and through the Holy Spirit.

For me, if and when we remain faithful to who we are; if and when we remember *whose* we are; if and when we remember that as long as we work with the Holy Spirit for change we can do nothing except God's work, there is reason for hope. The church will not only survive; the church will thrive! "Thrive" will not necessarily mean what we may think it should mean: it will mean what God intends it to mean.

I have deliberately used words from our Confessions as I've reflected on the future of our church. We declare that the confessions tell us and the world who and what we are, what we believe, and what we resolve to do. The Confessions help us to interpret and understand scripture as it guides us in determining where we've been, where we are, and where we must go if we are to remain faithful to our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ.

Whither the PC(USA)? As long as the PC(USA) is God's church the PC(USA) will remain a beacon of hope, a witness to the world that Jesus Christ is Lord.

AMEN!

Doris B. Mabrey is an Elder at First Presbyterian Church in Arlington, Virginia, a former moderator of National Capital Presbytery, and a reader of ordination exams for the denomination.