

GENERAL PRESBYTER'S REMARKS
MARCH 2004

MARKS OF A HEALTHY PRESBYTERY

Last year, the Evangelism & Congregational Development Committee developed some study papers for the congregations in Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery. Those papers, titled, "Marks of a Healthy Congregation," are designed to help a congregation engage in conversation about why a congregation exists and how well they are doing as a congregation. Among the questions for reflection are: "What are you doing to build strong disciples?" "What is your purpose - how many of your members could recite it, if asked?" "What are you doing to participate in mission?" "Can you identify a mission beyond survival?"

A growing number of Sessions are using these worksheets as the basis for officer training, Session retreats, or mission study. The premise behind the production of these worksheets is not that there is a pre-determined set of correct answers. Rather, each congregation must answer such questions within their own context. And further, Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery is only as strong as the collective sum of its congregations. Thus, EOP exists to foster and encourage healthy congregations.

But what are the corresponding marks of a healthy Presbytery? For that matter, what are the marks of a healthy governing body in general? These are questions which should be taking up much of our time, prayer, and energies in the near future. The old models have served us well for many years - of congregations coming to presbytery-designed workshops so that they can go home and institute local variations of a unified vision of what congregations ought to look like.

No longer does one size fit all (something my own wardrobe has underscored for a number of years now). And congregations are looking for tools for reflection which allow them to reflect on what is unique about themselves and their context for ministry. This is something the Presbytery and its staff are trying to take seriously, making ourselves more available to congregations and to clusters of congregations with similar interests. One of our roles is to ask what particular congregations need in order to be faithful to Christ's call to mission and what resources the Presbytery might have to help them accomplish their mission.

However, Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery has not, in recent memory, stepped back to ask, "Who is God calling us to be and what is God calling us to do?" To our discredit, it is often only as budget dollars get short that we force ourselves to ask such questions. But it is time that these questions be asked, nevertheless. Whether you are a disciple of the Missional Church or the Purpose-Driven Church, the question is the same (and in simple terms, the same as it is for each congregation): What is your purpose and does it give focus to all that you do?

Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery is entering a season of discernment. What will it mean for us to be an effective Presbytery in the months and years to come? A new Presbytery Planning Team, composed of the at-large members of the Council and the moderators of Presbytery and Council, is taking a serious look at our time together at our quarterly stated meetings. Their intent is that, through worship, plenary speakers, reports from our own congregations in mission, and

workshops, we will leave each Presbytery meeting with ideas of what might work in our local congregations. Rather than hearing reports from committees, we look for more stories about what is happening and what might happen in local congregations. We are hoping that Presbytery meetings will become a priority for ministers and elders alike - someplace where they can be challenged with new ideas and encouraged to be faithful servants of Christ and the Church. We hope to hear from you what would make your participation in Presbytery more valuable and productive.

Unfortunately, we do not operate in a vacuum or with limitless resources. Our congregations try to be faithful to their call to be good stewards. Most of our congregations give generously to mission. I wish there were more invitations to Session meetings to talk about how the Presbytery and a particular congregation might be better partners in mission. However, the downturns in our mission budget have less to do with dissatisfaction or dissent and more to do with the general economy and, I suspect, the lack of a compelling vision of what we are about.

Since I have been here, the general mission giving of this presbytery has declined steadily. The Council has voted to set aside an entire meeting to discuss the budget and program priorities of Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery. It will be a difficult discussion, as such discussions always are. But, if we are to be a truly effective presbytery, we must understand what we are all about and measure each of the things we do by whether or not they get us closer to achieving our purpose. I hope that it will be a process filled with the glory and grace of God in our midst. And I trust that in all we do, Christ will be present. For Christ does not promise us an easy journey, but summons us simply to be faithful to the call to serve. I look forward to that journey with you.