

You Asked for It: What in the World Is the Presbyterian Church Doing?

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
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Text: Matthew 28:19, 20 and II Corinthians 9:1-15

What in the world is the Presbyterian Church doing?

No, this is not a sermon about the latest developments in our denominational debates about human sexuality. Today's requested topic concerns what *in the world* our church is doing to fulfill Christ's command to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing...and teaching them..." The member who asked for it is appreciative of this congregation's historical commitment to outreach in our city and region, our youth mission trips and education, and the generosity of our members to local projects and initiatives. Yet she wondered about our global perspective, particularly as compared with more evangelical denominations for whom "missionary work" beyond the United States is more explicitly identified with their mission.

I'm glad for the opportunity to explore this topic, as I've been privileged to see with my own eyes the impact of Presbyterian mission in Honduras, Cuba, Mexico and Ethiopia. But I'm also aware of the difficulty it poses on a hot summer Sunday, when the headlines of our local newspaper are filled with heartbreaking stories of violence in our own city. I'm mindful of the member who writes a hefty check to Fairmount annually, but adds as he hands it to me, "Keep it here." I know he is not alone in the sentiment that we should attend to the needs of our own house *first*.

These concerns are important, but not new. The reading from the second letter to the Corinthian churches provides a glimpse of how the church in the earliest years struggled with similar questions of priority. The apostle Paul is renowned as "the missionary to the Gentiles," for taking the Gospel of Jesus Christ beyond the boundaries of its Jewish origins into the

world where it engaged with Greek philosophy, polytheism, and nature religions. Many persons embraced its message of love and redemption and churches were established throughout the Mediterranean region. But as the nascent church grew, so did the breadth of its mission. Budgets got stretched. Resources were carefully stewarded. At one of the first-century versions of the General Assembly, the founding church in Jerusalem sent official word to Paul outlining its acute needs, and requesting that amid his expansion projects, he not neglect the poor back in the city where it all started. So Paul devised a plan in which each of the new churches would send a percentage of its offerings to headquarters. And thus was birthed “per capita” assessments, which the Presbyterian Church continues to practice.

In the text which immediately precedes this one, Paul writes to remind the Corinthians about their promise to participate in this plan. He’s not above upping the ante in Corinth by highlighting the abundant gifts of the Macedonian churches (though it becomes evident that he’s also done this with the Macedonians!). But notice the other arguments he makes for sharing the burdens of the church in every place. A reading from the second letter to the Corinthians, in the 9th chapter at the first verse. Listen for God’s Word!

[II Corinthians 9:1-15]

What can you buy with six dollars? Well, a gallon and a half of gas, at least for now. Six dollars won’t even get you into a movie theater. Once there, with six dollars you could have popcorn or a drink, but not both. My favorite Asian take-out place recently raised the price for its lunch-sized portion of pad thai, to \$7.50. The “regenerating lotion” I use to, er, maintain the youthful pliancy and glow of my skin costs triple that (and worth every penny!!!!) It seems that six dollars doesn’t buy much these days. *Except when it comes to global mission!* The Presbyterian Church assesses each of its 11,000 congregations a fee based on number of members. Here in the Presbytery of the Western Reserve, Fairmount pays around \$30 per member annually as part of our responsibility to the connectional church. Of that \$30, six dollars and 4 cents are

forwarded to the General Assembly where it provides critical support for work in nearly 100 countries around the world. When you make a stewardship commitment to Fairmount (unless you designate otherwise), you “buy” shares in God’s work of justice, peace, and love carried out by the church in Pakistan, Ethiopia, China, and Peru, as well as Cleveland and the U.S. And what do you get for those six dollars? Consider these brief snapshots:

Hector Nilo is only 37 years old, but you could never guess it from his deeply-lined face. Maybe it’s having eight children, which can age you pretty fast. Maybe it’s the hot Honduran sun, and the hours he has spend under it as a campesino, a farm worker, a peasant. Or maybe that wrinkled face reflects wisdom born of experience and faith. Hector was one of the work supervisors on a mission trip to Honduras I led about a year after Hurricane Mitch had wreaked its devastation. He described how “the rains came, the wind and then the mud. As far as you can see. People’s houses collapsed. All the crops were destroyed.” Yet I saw corn growing in the adjacent field—an acre or more. Within weeks after the storm, Hector and others had painstakingly hand-planted the field with seed corn provided by Presbyterian Disaster Relief.

Even before Hurricane Mitch hurled its destructive power, Honduras was a desperately poor nation. A tragic history of domination—first by Spanish invaders, later by multinational fruit companies—has impeded its social and economic development. Perhaps 80% of the population are poor, without land to grow crops. Currently only 13% of the children are educated beyond the sixth grade, and the national literacy rate is around 70%. In this context, the Presbyterian Church working cooperatively with other faith groups funds the Christian Commission for Development (or CCD) to improve the lives of the Honduran people. Using principles of community organizing, the commission has addressed problems in health and nutrition, education, and economic development. For example, child malnourishment has sharply declined in the rural villages where CCD works, largely through obtaining cows and goats which provide milk and meat, seeds

for food crops, and engineering safer water delivery systems. Land, which is too expensive for most Hondurans to buy, is purchased through a no-interest loan program established by CCD that the community repays from profits generated from the crops harvested from it. Education surrounds all of CCD's programs, and it's working. Two of Hector Nilo's children have gone to college, and returned to the village, one as a teacher and one as an agricultural expert, working to develop hybrids that will thrive in the rocky mountain soil near Tegulcigalpa.

Hector's story illustrates some of the ways the Presbyterian Church does global mission: wholistically—responding to immediate needs as well as long-term problems; developing and training indigenous leadership--- avoiding dependency and paternalism; and cooperatively—with other faith groups, NGOs, international aid groups, and government agencies. Like every other Christian body, the Presbyterian Church must own up to its Western bias, and at times in its long history of mission activity, its imperialistic perspectives. Hunter Farrell directs global mission for the denomination and in a recent interview remarked how thoughtfully global mission is done now, informed by the communities served-- who give as well as receive. Because of this checkered history, the Presbyterian Church has abandoned use of the word "missionary," and its connotations of bringing the light to benighted heathens, and instead speaks of "mission co-workers" who labor alongside indigenous partners.

It is Christian faith that animates these efforts, faith shared in lively worship in house churches; faith shared in the sweat of labor for a decent livelihood; faith shared in medical supplies and personnel; faith shared through libraries and schools and scholarships. As Hector himself expressed it, "My hope does not come from nature—it let us down. My hope does not come from my own strength, for I get very tired. Mi esperanza viene solamente de Dios—my hope comes only from God." A God Hector knows largely through the global mission of the Presbyterian Church.

A world away in Ethiopia, Presbyterians founded the very first school for girls, in 1916. Today over a thousand girls from kindergarten through high school receive a superior education that will enable them to have a good chance at a better life than their mothers before them. This is particularly significant with the rise of fundamentalist Muslim groups restricting women's educational opportunities. Again and again on a visit led by Dr. Dan and Jane Reynolds, Fairmount members who served for 17 years as medical mission workers, we heard and saw evidence of a vital, dynamic, servant church. Over 4 million members (compared with 2 ½ million in the Presbyterian Church USA)---of which 70% are under 30. Worship services packed to overflowing; Ethiopian pastors trained in seminaries sponsored by the Presbyterian Church working side by side with lay leaders to proclaim God's love in word AND in deed. There seems to be little distinction between worship and mission. Pastor Ojot looked surprised when I commented on this. He said (as if it were obvious), "Jesus Christ saves the whole person: body, mind and spirit." So the church is immersed in national literacy programs and expanding educational opportunities. Teams of Ethiopians are translating the Bible into more of the 90 tribal languages present there. A church leader wrote the most widely-used book on medical treatment of persons with HIV who live in rural areas with little access to life-prolonging medicines. We heard about church initiatives to stop female genital mutilation which is widely practiced in rural areas.

When questioned about the church's mission in Ethiopia, Dr. Reynolds is quick to reply, "We weren't there to convert the people, but to demonstrate God's love for the whole world." That's the conviction upon which Presbyterian global mission is founded, and the spirit that has caused it to thrive in spite of persecution, warfare, persistent problems that don't readily yield to solution.

The coffee served by our hosts in Cuba was akin to mainlining caffeine, with a double shot of sugar thrown in for good measure. We were celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Presbyterian Church's ministry in the communist country.

Even after Fidel Castro led the revolution and installed himself as president-for-life, the Presbyterian Churches were permitted to remain open, with some restrictions. Today they are growing by leaps and bounds, and the seminary in Matanzas is graduating over 30 pastors—both men and women—each year. “Isn’t it hard to be Christian in a communist country?” we asked Pastor Mendez. “Yes, it is,” he admitted with a twinkle in his eye, adding, “as difficult as it is to be Christian in a capitalist country.” As changes inevitably come to Cuba, I know the church will be there as it has for more than a century, offering a way, a truth, and a life which transcends politics. Look for the bulletin board in Andersen Hall featuring more stories about Presbyterian Global Mission. I commend to you also the Mission Yearbook for Prayer and Study which includes lists of mission co-workers alongside stories highlighting God’s work being carried out through the Presbyterian Church USA.

Go into all the world Jesus commissioned his followers, and the Presbyterian Church has tried to obey. Sometimes we get it wrong by retreating into survival mode, turning inward, and imagining we have to “keep it all here.” But I remember the definition of an arch attributed to Leonardo Da Vinci: “Two weaknesses, which leaning against one another make a strength.” The first century church had to learn, and so do we: the church cannot be confined to one particular place, one faith community, one social location. We have a global gospel. We are part of a worldwide family. There is no “us” versus “them”— and no “here” versus “there,” but only parts of the church universal leaning against one another; striving, stumbling, hungering, and hiking toward God’s Kingdom, the new heaven and new earth, redeemed and gloriously alive. In the meantime, friends, let us claim the truth that God will provide us with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, we may share abundantly in every good work. Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift! AMEN.

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