

STAYING IN THE CHURCH
Theodore J. Wardlaw
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I am grateful to be here with you on this important evening, and, on behalf of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, I want to thank you—and so many of the saints in this congregation who have gone before you—for the strong cords, across so many decades, that have bound the Seminary and this church to one another. Every year at Commencement, we give a promising graduate a preaching prize—a generous amount of money for further study in Preaching—that bears the name of Charles King, one of your former pastors. There is an endowed faculty chair in Evangelism and Mission, the Lancaster Chair, given by this church in honor of your former pastor and his wife Helen. Another important member of this church, Ed Vickery, an elder here, was also a longtime Chair of the Board, and his generosity provided funds for the Vickery Atrium at the McCord Center, the Dorothy Vickery Chair in Liturgics and Homiletics, a couple of endowed scholarships; and, just recently, a gift from his daughter, Anne Vickery Stephenson, who was raised in this church and is also a current trustee at the Seminary, to establish the Edward D. Vickery Distinguished Chair in Ethics. Many other persons in this congregation have given generously to the Seminary, and still do. Five or six years ago, there was a campaign for the John and Nancy Anderson House—a ten-million dollar apartment building that offers state-of-the-art housing for students—and that campaign began in the living room of George and Julia Jordan, who were among its major donors; and so many other members of this church helped make that building possible, and continue to support the life and work of our Seminary. These days, one of your former clerks of Session, Carleton Wilde, Jr., is an active trustee on our Board, and is one of its wisest voices. A number of our alums have served this church, including James Harper, of whom we are proud, and with whom I share this presentation tonight. Blest be the ties that bind.

I'm a Christian, and specifically a Presbyterian Christian, because I was born into this communion. Like James Harper, I am the son of a Presbyterian pastor. My mother, later in her life, was a Presbyterian elder, my brother is a Presbyterian pastor, my older daughter—just 25 years old—is a Presbyterian elder, I had uncles and great-uncles who were Presbyterian pastors, and more uncles, one aunt, one grandfather, and other ancestors down through the ages who were Presbyterian elders. I have a biological relationship with the Presbyterian Church.

But I am also a Presbyterian because I choose to be, and I keep choosing to be.

And so, because of that deep love—which is not uncritical, by the way—I am here tonight to try my best to help with the question you have posed: “Based on the mission and ministry of the PC(USA), why is it an exciting and positive place for First Presbyterian Church to stay?”

There is much excitement in the PC(USA). You've probably heard of the new initiative, "1001 Worshipping Communities." It got started just at the last General Assembly in Pittsburgh. It puts a value on New Church Developments, of course, but it goes beyond that. It doesn't just say, "Let's plant new churches in the same way we've always planted churches," but it also demonstrates how a churchly bureaucracy—even a churchly bureaucracy!—can leave space for the Holy Spirit to work in ways that we can't necessarily count or quantify. Many young adults under 40 are particularly interested in doing church differently—in starting new communities that don't necessarily have red carpet or an organ or meetings on Sunday morning. They are dreaming into reality new kinds of churches—churches that meet in shopping centers, or coffee shops, or under a bridge, or on street corners in decidedly non-Presbyterian neighborhoods—141 such communities so far, just in the last year-and-a-half. A number of Korean members of the PC(USA) are going to start something like 500 such communities in the next ten years. Not all of these efforts are going to succeed, because we're trying some new things, but in ten years we will have, altogether, 1001 new worshipping communities; and we'll also have some new ideas about what it means to be church.

Another thing I'm excited about with respect to mission and ministry is the Young Adult Volunteer program. It is one of the PC(USA)'s most important success stories. Young Adult Volunteers, or YAV's, are college graduates giving one or more years of their lives doing volunteer work in mission sites in and beyond this country—in Tucson working with immigration issues, or in Northern Ireland working in areas of reconciliation, or in Kenya or Zambia or Malawi teaching children or working in partnership to enable fresh water for villages. Many of these young people are on their way to be lawyers or doctors or entrepreneurs, and many of them are on their way to be ministers. At Austin Seminary, we have converted a dorm into a house for Young Adult Volunteers who are based on our campus, and who work in different mission sites in Austin. They live under a rule in their house, kind of like Protestant Benedictines. When Kay and I had supper with them a while back, they were praying and doing Bible study together every day, and also were reading and discussing in that time Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together*. Some of these YAV's, and other YAV's from all over, are matriculating these days every year at Austin Seminary or at other Presbyterian Church (USA) seminaries. They are global, they are missional, they are creative, they will do church differently, and when they are finished at seminary they are going out into churches and other ministries at just the moment when they are most needed. One of them addressed our board a couple of years ago, and said: "I want to serve Jesus wherever in the world I am called; and, if possible, I would like a paycheck." I was on a career path when I left seminary; these young people are amazingly mobile and are simply waiting to be called, and will go and serve anywhere in the world where they feel a call. They are helping us open the door of leadership to the next generation of the Church of Jesus Christ, and that is exciting.

It's exciting in the area of world missions in these years. Hunter Farrell, a child of Highland Park Presbyterian Church in Dallas, and now the head of World Missions in Louisville, told me on the phone this week that we commissioned ten new missionaries in January, and sixteen new missionaries in July. 351 PC(USA) congregations began supporting missions programs in 2012 who had not supported those programs in 2011.

That number has increased annually over the last three years. We went through a dearth of such support in the 70's and 80's, but we're getting more support from congregations and individuals than we have in the last ten years.

And all over the world, as Hunter tells me, we are watching the growing legacy of mission work across the decades. Presbyterian missionaries started what is today the largest Protestant Church in the Middle East, the Presbyterian Synod of the Nile, which has been independent since the 1950's. We support the Presbyterian Seminary in Cairo, where one of our alums is on staff, which has 300 students today from eight Middle Eastern countries. We have two million Presbyterians in the Congo, seven million in Kenya, two million more in Nigeria. The largest and fastest-growing churches on the African continent are Presbyterian churches which used to be mission churches. We planted seeds in China for years, until 1949, and then they pulled the curtain for years. And then, when the curtain came back up, the test came, as Hunter puts it, when we were able to see what had happened with those seeds. Now the church in China is the fastest-growing church in the world—and in great measure, as Hunter tells me, because of the Presbyterian Church's commitment to working ecumenically. The Korean Presbyterian Church, which was another of our mission churches, now has, themselves, over 1000 missionaries around the world in almost 50 countries. I'm excited about that.

I'm excited about the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance program, and I have seen—up close and personal—how well it works. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, my wife Kay and our two daughters—Shelby, who was then 16, and Claire, who was then 13—spent our Spring vacation that year not at our home in Montreat, as we had planned earlier, but rather in New Orleans doing relief work. We were there for a week, moving the waterlogged furniture and other rubbish out of houses made uninhabitable by the storm, and then tearing out the sheetrock and otherwise preparing the houses for reconstruction; and our base camp was a P.D.A. tent city on the grounds of a Presbyterian church in a suburban area. We worked each day alongside a Presbyterian Church (USA) congregation of Koreans from New Jersey, and it was a joy—even in the middle of tragedy—to work with them. One day, one of the owners of one of the houses we were cleaning out came and spoke to us. “Are you folks church people?” he said. “Yes,” somebody in our groups said. “We're Presbyterians.” He said, “I'm a Catholic; I don't know a thing about Presbyterians. But I do know that you're the people who keep coming back.” I was amazed at the organization of the PDA, the efficiency of it, and of the fact that they were there for the duration of those trauma-filled months.

I could keep going on, talking about the Company of New Pastors; the ministry of Rob Fohr, the Young Adult Enabler of the church; the Montreat Youth Conferences—six different weeks in the Summer with a thousand Senior Highs there every week; the Youth Triennium that happens at Purdue University every three years—5300 Senior Highs there this Summer; the new curriculum coming out of Congregational Ministries Publishing, called “To Be Reformed.”

I could talk for much longer about how the PC(USA), even as it has lost members over the last few decades—just like every other mainline church, just like the Southern Baptist

church (the largest Protestant church in the country), just like, now, the evangelical independent churches are starting to do, just like the Catholics in every part of the country except the border states—even as it now hovers at just below 2,000,000 members (that’s in a little less than 11,000 churches and 173 presbyteries), it is still by far the largest, the oldest, and most visible Presbyterian body in the country (and, as an aside, I went to Wikipedia recently to read what it said about the PCUSA, and throughout that piece it pictured several churches—one of them an old historic church in the Northeast, some other churches, and, lo and behold, the stately steeple of this church as it rises above the canopy of treetops here in this beautiful corner of downtown Houston). The next largest Presbyterian body, the Presbyterian Church in America, has some 350,000 members, the third largest Presbyterian body, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church has some 150,000 members, and the Evangelical Covenanting Order has some 40 churches currently (others are surely on their way) and something like 10,000 members. The PC(USA) is by far the largest and the oldest Presbyterian communion in America, and I’m excited that it continues to have, and will continue to have, a big tent with voices from across the theological and political spectrum—to include, I hope against hope, your own ongoing and very important voice.

And I want to mention one more thing about which I’m excited, and you won’t be surprised. I am excited about the ten theological seminaries of the Presbyterian Church (USA). The President of the Association of Theological Schools in North America, who himself is a Southern Baptist, describes our ten theological seminaries as “the crown jewels of theological education in North America.” Our seminaries are particularly well-founded financially, they have stunning faculties that live up to our reputation as biblical-theological sense-makers, and they are turning out some of the finest students I have seen in two generations. Believe me, I could go on for too long about the strength and witness of our seminaries, but now I want to move in a different direction.

I have listed just a few things about which I’m excited. But now, I need to acknowledge, as you surely know, that it takes more than just excitement to be the church. If you teach Sunday School to three-year-olds or Middle-Schoolers or adults, there is an element of terror as well as excitement to all of that. If you are a pastor, it’s not necessarily the case that you bounce out of bed every day just bristling with excitement as you anticipate that committee meeting, or that contentious conversation with a staff member or an elder that you’re going to have that day, or that hard, lump-in-the-throat funeral that you’re going to have to plan. There are days when it’s not exciting; and maybe that’s why, in the Church’s wisdom, we have been required to take vows of ordination when we are called to leadership in the church. The Presbyterian and Reformed tradition, in what is at its best a majestic polity, is the only tradition I know of in which laypeople called to leadership are ordained to it. Every other tradition I know of has a board of laypeople of some sort, but ours is the only tradition I know of in which those people—we call them elders or deacons—are ordained by answering in greatest measure the same questions that pastors answer. And those vows we take as elders or deacons or pastors are particularly useful on those days when it’s not exciting.

Thirty-five years ago, in the month of July; at the beginning of that month I took vows of ordination, and at the end of that month I took vows of marriage. And in these ensuing thirty-five years of ordained life and married life, I have reflected a lot on the utter realism of both of those sets of vows. The marriage service, for example, doesn't just promise me excitement. It also promises me the scenarios of plenty *and* want, joy *and* sorrow, sickness *and* health. And the vows at ordination were just as blessedly honest. All of the questions I was required to answer *knit me* into a theological and ecclesial system in which Jesus Christ is Lord of the world and Head of the Church; in which the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as unique and faithful witnesses to Jesus Christ, are the Word of God; in which I would fulfill my office in *obedience* to Jesus Christ, *under the authority of Scripture*, and *continually guided* by the Confessions. There were a lot of questions, but the one that I have thought the most about was this one: "Do you promise subjection to your brothers and sisters in the Lord?" That question, by the way, was modified when we revised the ordination questions after the reunion in 1983 of the two predecessor churches—the old, so-called "Northern" church and the old, so-called "Southern" church. It became, "Will you be governed by our church's polity, and will you abide by its discipline? Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God's Word and Spirit?" The assumption behind those questions—the old one and the new one—is that, in the church, it's not always exciting. There is conflict, there are votes that some people win and others lose, and so the notion of subjection, or of being a friend among colleagues and working with them, is simply the reality of life together when we are in community—even in a blessed community that runs or walks or sometimes stumbles its way toward embodying Christ for the sake of the world.

And so, in spite of the sorry history of schism in American Presbyterianism, which has often diminished the power of our tradition's witness; we have been admonished, over and over again, by those vows and by the best of our tradition, to subject ourselves to one another and to be a friend in ministry in what is, finally, a large-spirited church and a living demonstration of Christ's barrier-breaking power. Because the alternative to that is to retreat to our separate corners into the easy, narrow familiarity of like-mindedness and thus to isolate ourselves from those brothers and sisters who love and serve the Lord with us, but on this or that subsidiary matter, see things a bit differently. Why, when we have this gospel treasure, would we smash the earthen vessel in which it's contained?

Tom Currie, another alum of Austin Seminary, and a pastoral theologian who used to serve in this presbytery, has said, over and over again, that the greatest heresy in the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition is that, somewhere out there, there is a purer church. Friends, there is not.

Here at the end of my presentation, I want to share three thoughts from three Johns. First of all, from John the Gospel-writer, Jesus' prayer for his disciples in Chapter 17. His hour has finally come, and so he prays for his church, and that includes us: "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, *that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have*

given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” If we take seriously the Lordship of Jesus Christ, we have to take this text seriously. Here is our Lord, praying across the ages for this vision of oneness (oneness, not likemindedness), and it is a strategic vision: *that the world may know.*

And then, secondly, there is John Calvin, our spiritual forebear in the faith, as he reflects upon the Corinthian church—a church that was plagued by division. John Calvin writes: “Among the Corinthians it was not a few that erred, but almost the whole body had become tainted; there was not one species of sin merely, but a multitude... There was not only corruption in manners but also in doctrine. What course was taken by the holy apostle [Paul]?... Does he seek separation from them? Does he discard them from the kingdom of Christ? Does he strike them with the thunder of a final anathema? He not only does none of these things, but he acknowledges and heralds them as a Church of Christ, and a society of saints. If the Church remains among the Corinthians,” says Calvin, “where envyings, divisions, and contentions rage; where quarrels, lawsuits and avarice prevail; where ... the name of Paul, whom they ought to have honored as a father, is petulantly assailed, where some hold the resurrection of the dead in derision...; where the gifts of God are made subservient to ambition, not to charity; where many things are done neither decently nor in order: If there the Church still remains, simply because the ministrations of word and sacrament is not rejected, who will presume to deny the title of church to those to whom a tenth part of these crimes cannot be imputed? (Calvin, Institutes, Book 4, Ch. 1, 14).

A word from John the gospel-writer and a word from John Calvin; and now a final word from John William Lancaster—former pastor of this church, a sanctified churchman, a lifelong scholar, for years a Board member and Chair of the Board at the Seminary, and a friend of many of us here. He has tried to keep quiet in this season of this church’s life. He has not taken part in the process in which this church is presently engaged, and is not here tonight because he’s staying away from these events. He is a friend and conversation partner; I know him well. He has had a remarkable ministry, and knows our communion in many, many corners. Former moderator of the Synod, moderator of two presbyteries, installed pastor in three churches, including this congregation for almost thirty years. Four interims in four different states, served on the Stillman College Board, chaired not just our seminary Board but also the Presbyterian Survey Board and the Outreach Foundation Board (founding member of the Outreach Foundation, which last year gave six million dollars to evangelism). He loves the ministry, and he loves this church, and he loves our communion. Across my twelve years at Austin Seminary, he and Helen and Kay and I have become friends. We sit almost every summer on that great porch of theirs in Montreat, and the first question he asks me is “Ted, what are you reading?” And then he shares with me the list of the books he’s reading. Yesterday afternoon we spoke on the phone. He and Helen are praying for us all tonight. I told him what I was planning to say, and I asked his permission to include him as one of the three Johns. He told me to tell you that he is in total agreement with the first two Johns.

At a presbytery meeting in Atlanta, shortly before I left the church I served there to come to Texas, it had been a long day of difficult votes. And finally, when the agenda was over, there was a motion to adjourn, and we were invited to stand for the closing prayer. Our moderator that year was particularly gifted by a rich devotional life, and when he led us in prayer it was as if he was curling his toes over the edge of Heaven itself. As we stood to pray on this occasion, he kept a long silence before he uttered these words—equal parts simple and profound: “Lord, we are forever asking you for many things, and what you are forever giving us instead...is the gift of one another.”

At the heart of our polity, even in the midst of disagreement, we believe at our best that God is forever giving us the gift of each other. Wherever we stand on the political or theological spectrum, we are given, through Jesus Christ, to one another and for the sake of a broken world—as a body which, in the mind of God, is at its best a sign of the Kingdom. And I pray to God that we can all get excited about that.