



**WRITTEN ON OUR HEARTS**  
**I Corinthians 12:12-16; John 17:23;**  
**1 Corinthians 10:16; Acts 2:4; Jeremiah 31:33**  
**June 26, 2016**  
**Dr. Thomas E. Evans**

I've just returned from General Assembly and some of you have already heard me explain it as the agony and the ecstasy. It was, in many ways, an amazing time. It was a family reunion. I saw hundreds of people that I knew very well when I was doing denominational work; many fabulous, amazing people from all around the country. Faithful Presbyterians that I'm so grateful and thankful for their witness.

But then also there was the agony of the legislative process, which was frustrating to no end. But many good things are coming out of it. And I'm not going to tell you what those are this morning. I want you to come back on Wednesday evening when Elder Lee Close and I will share the outcome of some of the specific things that happened at General Assembly.

But what I do want to share with you this morning is the talk that I gave before the General Assembly Committee. My charge was to be the Overture Advocate for the Foothills Overtures that we helped craft, and to explain to them what they were all about. I think people came to General Assembly not understanding what we were hoping to accomplish. And so a few days before it was time to give my talk, I really felt like God laid on my heart an inspiration about how it is that I was called to share the overtures – less content and more of the Biblical foundations that we're hoping to weave into the denomination. The Biblical values, and the scriptures that go along with them, help us understand the nature of the kind of church that God is calling us to.

It began with the fundamental understanding of what comes in the Book of Order that says is the purpose of General Assembly: *The General Assembly constitutes the bond of union, community, and mission among all its congregations and councils, to the end that the*

*whole church becomes a community of faith, hope, love, and witness.* (G-3.0501) That's what our denomination is looking for in the National Church but we know, that for various reasons, that has not come to pass.

Foothills was not trying to stop change, but rather to change the way that change takes place. Now, our denomination has largely done change through legislation, through up and down voting, which literally divides the community into those who say yes and those who say no. But we think that there's a better process and a better way of trying to seek God's will and to live into it. And that better way is based on the values of unity, community, diversity, and transformation. Those are the values of our overtures and let's start by exploring unity.

The challenge before us as a denomination is the fracturing of the church, the process that has literally divided us at General Assembly. It has led to thousands upon thousands of people looking for a different faith community to be a part of. And those people that have left are faithfully-engaged Presbyterians, whose witness was an important part of our community. But they became frustrated with the drive for change without the concomitant engagement of working together for that change.

The scriptural foundation in this point comes from Jesus' words Himself as He said in his prayer to God that they may *be completely one so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me* (John 17:23). Christ took with utmost importance the unity of the Church. It was His prayer for us that "they might be one". And furthermore Christ believed that this was a critically important tool to spread the Gospel, to spread the Good News. Christ believed that when the world saw that a church filled with his followers, that even though those followers may be

of many different opinions on things, even though they are of different minds, they are of one Spirit; they are together because of their mutual love for Christ. But when the world sees us divided, then we give the exact opposite message.

And so we worked to fashion overtures that would build the unity of the church back. One of those overtures was 0401 – that we legislate at the General Assembly only every third General Assembly. That translates into every 6 years, which interestingly enough is the same overture that David Renwick and you all put forward – that General Assembly only meet every 6 years. This was a little further than we were interested in going but it's the same principle. We thought by meeting every two years, and only one-third of those being legislative, that we could spend those other gatherings in deep prayer and fervent discussion, not believing that we always need to divide the house in order to live in to God's will.

We all know that change is difficult. Change can be very difficult. We see it in our local congregations, no matter the size or theology, whether it's the color of the carpet, the Pew cushions, or what-have-you, we know that any change is hard for the system to absorb. We can work as a denomination to make less changes and help those to go deeper rather than simply wider. We believe that we will have a church that is more faithful to Christ call to be one.

The next value that we sought to inculcate into our denomination was the value of community. Over time, the Presbyterian Church has become more bureaucratic and more hierarchical. When our church first began to become bureaucratic there were many good things that were results of that: a more efficient method of communication and decision-making and dispersing resources through the bureaucracy allowed for the church to do a great deal more for the kingdom. But, like any bureaucracy, it became top-heavy, it begins to feed its own interest. And so we seek a way to minimize and reduce the bureaucracy of the church and

allow for a more Biblical principle to the organizational structure.

That biblical principle is Koinonia – the verse comes from 1 Corinthians 10:16, “is not the cup of blessing that we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ is not the bread which we break a Koinonia in the body of Christ”. So one of the overtures that we sought to help live into this community is that overtures would require a 15% concurrence of presbyteries before they went forward. Now think about communion. Every time that we celebrate communion, the image that is to be before us is that we are sitting around a supper table with our Lord; that we are in a circle; that we are one body surrounding our Lord and that bread and that wine. And just the way communion is to connect us, not only to the Lord but to one another, intimately and lovingly, so, too, it is with every task that the church is to take on.

It uses Koinonia in the Bible to describe the Jerusalem offering. So the tasks that we are wrestling with, as a denomination, are meant to be done in communal love. Think of it as a bicycle wheel. At the center of that wheel is the hub and all the spokes are connected to the center of the wheel. Think of all those spokes as different people. Then there's the rim, there's the wheel itself. That is the connections amongst us that binds us to one another – and all of it is community.

As we engage and wrestle with difficult issues as a denomination, we need to be doing that in relationship partnering and listening to each other – particularly Presbytery to Presbytery. Our denomination is made up of Presbyteries and those Presbyteries need to be in community and conversation with one another as it goes about the work.

The next principal that we hope to weave into the denomination is one of diversity. Top-down justice solutions that only provide a single answer to a difficult societal problem limit voices. And because of it, we are losing a whole segment of a voice in our denomination. One of our overtures

was calling the denomination to vastly reduce the number of divisive up-down / yes-no positions on partisan issues and, instead, implore its members and congregations to be involved in those issues in their communities.

The denomination would challenge Presbyteries and churches on important issues of society and challenge that church to find out how God is calling it to be involved. This is how we do theology. Many of you have heard me describe this before. Back in the 1920s there was a fight in the Church of whether or not every minister was to have to say yes to a list of subscriptionist standards – you had to believe precisely this about the atonement and you had to believe precisely this about scripture. The denomination said “no, we're not going to do that.”

Instead, what we're going to do is we are going to have broad theological principles and we are going to trust the local congregation in examining its elders and deacons and we're going to trust the Presbytery to do the same. That's how we do theology – with broad principles that are applied locally. And that's how we are advocating for General Assembly to work as well.

The scriptural principle here comes to us from Pentecost in the second chapter of Acts, the fourth verse, “all of them” ... ***all of them*** ... “were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the spirit gave them ability.” This we also heard in the Corinthians passage that there are many different parts of the body. Notice here in this Pentecost event, the Spirit didn't make everybody speak in the same language. No, they spoke in many different languages but they understood one another.

That was the miracle.

People were still able to speak with their own unique voice. So we want to help transform General Assembly and the National Church in such a way that allows a multiplicity of voices to be heard out of General Assembly and then for congregations and Presbyteries to hear those

voices and to discern particularly which voice it is being called to live into. We need to forge a way that allows us to be a First Corinthians 12 Church, in which everyone's gifts are allowed to be manifested in the one body of Christ.

And then, finally, we seek to be a denomination that is more about transformation than legislation. The challenge is that legislation often fails to create deep change, to create real change. There are many scriptural foundations for this, but I draw from Jeremiah in which God says, “I will put my law within them and I will write it upon their hearts.”

The call is for transformation of individuals and of society. So legislation is something like moving from the church of Leviticus to a church of Acts. Leviticus is filled with many laws for the people of God but in Acts the Spirit blows through and powers and pours out on individual people. It is like the difference between a denomination of the Ten Commandments, of laws that are written on stone tablets, and a denomination of the Great Commandment, in which love is the driving force for action and living into God's will.

Transformation is what is needed for Koinonia, for the Beloved Community. For the kingdom of God that envisions transformation, legislation does not go far enough. Jesus was deeply concerned about this. So when we affect legislation, without the concomitant change of people's hearts and minds, people are left out of the kingdom.

Remember the aim – that the whole church become a community of faith, hope, love, and witness. We've done a tremendous job as a denomination of being a community of faith, one of hope, and one of witness. But, unfortunately, we've not done well being a denomination of deep love for one another. The ultimate hope is to lead us into the example of Christ, whose primary strategy is to change people's hearts and minds. Legislation can often become the easy road, to avoid the hard work of you and I sitting down together and fellowshiping with one another and working things out for a common purpose.

I love the PC(USA). I love its theology. I love its worship. I love its mission. I love its history. It is deeply woven into the fibers of my very being. But, what I love even more, are Presbyterians. I love all of you. I love Presbyterians from the most progressive churches in the denomination like Central Presbyterian in Atlanta, from conservative churches like South Highland in Birmingham, from Korean churches in Buffalo, from African-American churches like New Life Presbyterian in Arkansas. I love them all.

Having had the privilege of being able to worship with them and work with them has been one of the great blessings of being a pastor in this denomination and I feel so very blessed. But we can do better as a people of God. And so I ask that you continue to have faith, continue to have hope, and continue to have love for this church which God has placed us into – that we might be a beacon of hope and transformation for people in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.