

A large, stylized graphic of a flame or torch, split vertically. The left half is blue and the right half is orange. The graphic is composed of thick, rounded lines that form a central vertical stem with two large, upward-curving flames on either side.

Is There a Future for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)?

Clifton Kirkpatrick

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Publisher's Note

It is with pleasure that I commend to you this latest essay in the Price H. Gwynn III Leadership Series. It is authored by the Rev. Clifton Kirkpatrick, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and President, World Alliance of Reformed

Churches. In spite of an incredibly busy season when Cliff is concluding his notable service to PC(USA) as the Stated Clerk, he agreed to share his reflections, hopes, and dreams regarding the future of his beloved denomination.

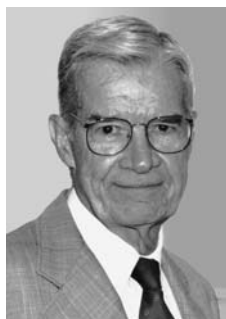
Throughout history God has lifted up leaders of great faith who serve as caring and faithful pilots for the community of believers and as witnesses to the observing world. These leaders are called to navigate the sometimes-turbulent waters in which the community may sail. Occasionally there are those who stand out as leaders with particular grace, resolve, and courage. The Presbyterian Church has benefited from many such leaders throughout its history, but Cliff Kirkpatrick stands out by any measure. Cliff shares a passion for living the good news of Christ, which is evident to anyone who meets him. In a time of challenges and tensions in the Presbyterian body, Cliff has continually provided vision, patience, compassion, and a reconciling word in his ministry.

We are happy to share this essay with pastors and leaders in the denomination in the hope that Cliff's reflections from where he sits will resonate, challenge, and inspire you and the denomination as it continues its voyage forward into complex times.

This is the tenth volume in this series. It is intended to offer help, provoke thought, and inspire faithful service among Presbyterian leaders. This series honors the distinguished service of Presbyterian leader Price Gwynn. While Price is not involved in the selection of writers or topics, I'm sure he'll appreciate this offering, as he and Cliff have many attributes in common, and they are both proud alumni of Davidson College. They are both persons of great faith who love and have served the Presbyterian Church tirelessly and with great distinction. And they both mirror the love of Christ as they display genuine joy and respect when they openly engage with others.

Marc Lewis

Marc Lewis
President and Publisher-Elect
Presbyterian Publishing Corporation



Price H. Gwynn III, Moderator of the 202nd General Assembly (1990) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), is the son and grandson of Presbyterian ministers and became a successful businessman as well as an extremely effective elder of the Presbyterian Church. Prior to his election as moderator, this North Carolina native was vice president and director of Lance, Inc., having previously served as president of two other major companies. After being elected, Gwynn became the only moderator of our denomination to be featured in *The Saturday Evening Post* for his extensive business experience. Such experience prepared him to serve as chairman of the board of Presbyterian Publishing Corporation during an important time of transition. Gwynn served on the board from 1993 to 2001.

His experience and leadership at all levels of the Presbyterian Church are equally impressive. Gwynn has served as deacon, elder, Sunday school teacher, and synod representative and has held extensive presbytery committee assignments, as well as acting as moderator of his presbytery. He was awarded five honorary degrees from Presbyterian colleges, including Davidson, where he also served on the board of trustees. During his distinguished career, he chaired the board of Presbyterian Hospital in Charlotte, and he was an active member of the board of trustees of Union Theological Seminary in Richmond.

Further national church leadership roles include former membership on the General Assembly Council, the Committee on the Spiritual Welfare of the Church, and the Special Committee for Review of the General Assembly. Gwynn has combined all of these activities with a distinguished military career, outstanding civic service, and, with his wife, Katherine, strong family ties with their three sons and their grandchildren.

Is There a Future for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)?

Clifton Kirkpatrick



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Not long ago, a reporter from a well-known magazine called me. She was quite agitated about one of the perennial conflicts in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and wanted me to add fuel to the fire by siding with one party in the conflict. She was obviously very angry and wished that I would concur with her analysis that the best days of the PC(USA) were clearly in the past. When she was not able to get the answers she wanted, she finally asked in exasperation, “Well, Reverend Kirkpatrick, do you really think there is a future for the PC(USA)?”

Much to her surprise, I responded quickly to her inquiry with, “Of course I do!”

“But why?” she asked.

Almost without thinking, I replied, “Because of my grandchildren!”

That obviously did not seem like a satisfactory response to her, but she had the good judgment not to argue about my grandchildren, so she politely concluded our conversation and went looking for others who might give her an answer more to her liking.

Looking back on the conversation, I realize I could and should have given her a much more reflective answer about not only the problems facing the PC(USA) but also the many signs of how God is at work in our fellowship that give me hope for the future of our communion. However, I also realize that my answer, in its own strange way, was correct.

I truly do believe that the God who has blessed my family for now over two hundred years through the ministry of the Presbyterian church in this country certainly must intend this blessing for my three incredibly beautiful grandchildren!

However, given that most people will not be persuaded by the argument about my grandchildren, I want to challenge us all to look more deeply at the question the reporter—and so many other people—are indeed asking today: Is there a future for the PC(USA)? Having spent twelve years as Stated Clerk of the General Assembly—a remarkably privileged vantage point to look at the life of our church—I want to use this essay to respond more deeply and substantively to this most important question. I want to explore with you the deep problems and pains that give legitimate rise to questions like this; I also want to share with you the elements of the solid foundation on which my hope for the future of this church is built.



Reasons to Doubt the Future of the PC(USA)

One can identify plenty of legitimate reasons to doubt that there is a vital future for the PC(USA) as one of God's major instruments for sharing the love of Christ with the people of the United States and the world. All of us know too well that we have been living through a half century of mainline decline. We are a long way from the Protestant establishment that many of our forebears took for granted—a conviction that the United States was a Christian nation and that the mainline Protestant churches, none more prominent than the Presbyterian, were the backbone of this Christian society.

I grew up in a large Presbyterian church in Memphis, Tennessee. It was clearly our assumption that if we built a large Presbyterian church, they would come! It was also our assumption that as a church in a Christian society with a passion for mission, we had to be mainly concerned about our missionaries overseas. The mission frontier was in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. It was assumed that most Presbyterian churches were middle-size, middle-class, and Euro-American institutions.

These assumptions have been turned totally on their heads over the last fifty years. Every Presbyterian congregation knows that our brand loyalty and buildings alone will attract very few. If churches are to grow, they must be missionary churches. We also know that we live in a missionary situation right here in our own country. The future of this church, if there is to be one, must be a multicultural future. We clearly live in a society where our Reformed assumption that God has chosen us to be in the Presbyterian Church has been replaced by a consumer mentality: We shop not only for washing machines and computers but also for a church home that makes us most comfortable.

Not only has the nature of our society changed dramatically from what we sometimes think of as the good old days, but also we have found ourselves eclipsed by the rise of megachurches and evangelical and Pentecostal bodies that we could not have imagined being the dominant form of Christian presence even a generation ago. Many of these churches are far shallower theologically but far savvier technologically. In terms of contemporary culture and cultural forms, they are growing very rapidly.

To be Presbyterian and Reformed in the twenty-first century often feels like a countercultural experience. To build vital



churches in this kind of environment is a tremendous challenge to those of us in the PC(USA)—often a challenge that seems more daunting than our capabilities.

Decline in Membership and Loss of Vitality

In addition to the general problem of mainline decline, we have a very real problem of declining membership (and in many cases church vitality) in the PC(USA). At our peak numerically in 1966, we had a combined membership of 4,250,000 in the two denominations (the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the Presbyterian Church in the United States) that eventually reunited to form the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Our membership as of the end of 2006 (the last year for which statistical data is available) was 2,267,118. We know that we have lost at least another 50,000 over the last eighteen months because of congregations withdrawing to the New Wineskins movement. The net result is that we have roughly half the number of members we had forty years ago—the same period of time when there has been rapid population growth in our country. Any way you look at it, a dramatic membership loss! And given the average age of members in many of our congregations, this is a trend that is not likely to be reversed in the short run.

As membership numbers have declined, so has the size of congregations. The median size of a PC(USA) congregation is currently 105. Relatedly, over four thousand PC(USA) congregations do not have installed pastoral leadership. While several smaller-membership congregations are extremely vital and engaged in important mission outreach, the dramatic rise of congregations unable to afford installed pastoral leadership is not an encouraging sign for the future of the denomination.

To me, an even deeper problem lies beyond the sheer aggregate numbers. We have a loss of vitality in many of our churches. The result is that these congregations live off of a survival rather than a missional mentality. We have far too many churches—whether large, small, or medium sized—that are squarely in a maintenance mentality rather than a missional mentality. Moving into a missional mentality is essential for a thriving church in today's multicultural environment in the country and in the PC(USA).

While Christian faithfulness can never be correlated to numerical growth, this dramatic decline in numbers and vitality is not a healthy sign for the PC(USA). We are in des-



perate need of spiritual and missional renewal if we are to be a vital, Christ-centered, multicultural church in the twenty-first century.

Partisan Spirit and Interest-Group Politics

Another reason that some might question whether the PC(USA) has a future is the unhealthy rise in our denomination of a partisan spirit and interest-group politics.

If you do a Google News search of “Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),” the majority of articles that appear are related to conflicts and controversies in our church. I did such a search for this essay and found that thirty-one out of the first fifty entries were about conflicts among Presbyterians over church property, ordination and human sexuality, withdrawing from the denomination, theological differences, and the like. What a negative witness we give to the world!

Our present-day dynamics are much like the New Testament church in Corinth. If you read 1 Corinthians, you do not have to change many words to make this Paul’s epistle to the PC(USA). The apostle begins by lamenting that some claim to follow Paul, others Apollos, and others Cephas, and still others (the truly self-righteous) claim to follow Christ (implying that others do not) rather than focusing on their unity in Christ. That is not much different from all of the interest groups that seem to garner the loyalty of countless Presbyterians today!

Paul continues by pointing out to the Corinthians how destructive their battles were over theological differences, sexual immorality, and even the gap between the rich and the poor at the Lord’s Table. He reminds them—and us—that their God-given diversity is intended not to cause conflict with one another but to complement one another: The eye and the ear, the hand and the foot, can build up one another into the body of Christ.

That call to find unity in the body of Christ is one that we badly need in the PC(USA) today. It echoes the high priestly prayer of our Lord, “that they may all be one . . . that the world may believe” (John 17:21).

Loss of a Dynamic, Unifying Witness

A third reason—one less-often realized—that might lead us to question the future of the PC(USA) is that we seem to have lost any sense of a common mission and vision as to what God is calling us to do and to be. Our churches are all over the map!



This has not always been the case in American Presbyterianism. At several points throughout history, Presbyterians, while from very different congregations, seemed united around greater mission goals that they shared together. The cry of “the world for Christ in this generation” united all Presbyterians a century or more ago in common support of the Presbyterian world mission enterprise. Prior common commitments that excited and linked together large numbers of Presbyterians were such things as the Sunday school movement, the national missions effort to plant the gospel and Presbyterianism from shore to shore, and the antislavery and civil rights movements.

I am reading again R. Douglas Brackenridge’s excellent biography of my predecessor titled *Eugene Carson Blake: Prophet with Portfolio*. I am interested in how Blake, while carrying all the myriad duties of a Stated Clerk, was able to focus his ministry on two great causes with such intensity: civil rights for all Americans and the unity of the church through the ecumenical movement. He managed to rally so much of the passion and the energy of congregations behind these two great movements. While justice and ecumenism continue to be hallmarks of our faithfulness to the gospel, such a single-minded focus either for the Stated Clerk or for the entire church is hard to imagine in our day when so many claims are made for what should take priority in our life together.

Perhaps the most serious sign of this loss of a unifying mission for Presbyterians is the change in orientation that has taken place in almost every governing body beyond the session. When I came into service with the General Assembly twenty-seven years ago, it was common wisdom that the primary reason we had presbyteries, synods, and a General Assembly was to carry out the missions that no congregation could do alone. They were our agencies to do mission collectively for Presbyterians. A generation later, I find that none of these bodies use such language. Now presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly compete to resource congregations, which are seen as the sole mission agencies of the church.

While this focus on missionary congregations is a very helpful one, our difficulty in articulating and carrying out a common mission for all Presbyterians is a great loss. In a world where the powers and principalities of our time are widening the gap between rich and poor, countering violence with violence, and threatening the future of our planet, a strong and united witness by Presbyterians to God’s transforming love and justice is needed now more than ever!



Indeed, a number of reasons exist that lead us to ask if the PC(USA) has a future. We must take seriously these realities that cause people to ask if God still has a purpose and a ministry in store for Presbyterians.

Reasons to Hope in the Future of the PC(USA)

As pastors, elders, and leaders of this denomination, we are being called to give people reason to hope in the future of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). We are being called by God to be Christ's faithful evangelists—growing and nurturing the church; promoting the peace, unity, and purity of the church; and lifting up a vision of God's transforming love that creates a different world from our current reality.

To be Christ's faithful evangelists is not to despair but to see the signs among us of how God is already working in our midst. We are called to articulate those things that give us hope and provide us with the resources to build up the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in the twenty-first century. We are called to be a living expression of the body of Christ that God can use to turn the world upside down for the gospel and God's good purposes.

Let me turn to six areas of strength that I believe God has given us Presbyterians as the foundation for this church's faithful ministry in the years ahead.

A Theological Foundation Second to None

You should not be surprised to learn that a Stated Clerk turns to the PC(USA) Constitution as one of the greatest sources of hope for the denomination—and indeed I do! While I believe, along with many others, that our Constitution is far too regulatory, too manual oriented, and too little mission focused for us to be a faithful church in this day and time, I believe strongly that its foundational vision is one of the greatest treasures we have as Presbyterians. It is a vision that is second to none as to how God intends to build up the body of Christ to be faithful in its mission in this age—and in every age.

We desperately need constitutional revision so that we can have a Form of Government that is based on our solid Reformed foundations and, at the same time, is far more flexible than our current Form of Government. Such a revision would allow us to be a missional church, or a variety of missional churches, in twenty-first-century America.

I am delighted and encouraged that the Form of Govern-



ment Task Force is bringing just such a proposed constitutional revision to the 218th General Assembly (2008). Simultaneously, we also need to reclaim those theological foundations that shape our life together, that can give us renewed common ground and set us free for a vital witness in today's world. For me, those theological foundations are found most clearly in the first four chapters of our current Form of Government. (While the revisions proposed by the Form of Government Task Force express these principles in fresh language, they keep these foundations intact.)

The first of the four chapters begins with what we value most—Jesus Christ. It establishes our whole life as a church under Jesus Christ, who is the living head of the church. Because Jesus Christ is the head of the church, it flows naturally that our mission statement is the Great Ends of the Church, found in G-1.0200: “the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.” What a wonderful and comprehensive statement of what Christ calls us to be and to do!

Chapter 2 makes it clear that Jesus Christ is the Word of God and that Scripture bears witness to him. It also summarizes the great themes of our confessions—our belief in the Trinity and the incarnation, our strong affirmation of the watchwords of the Protestant Reformation (“faith alone, grace alone, scripture alone”), and our deep commitment to that core Reformed conviction of the sovereignty of God. Throughout all of our confessions are common affirmations that define the shared faith of the church.

Chapter 3 emphasizes that the church is indeed a missionary society and that its life is to be defined by its mission. That mission involves joyfully proclaiming the gospel, prophetically witnessing to God's justice, and faithfully living the Christian life.

Chapter 4 is about the church and its unity. To be Presbyterian is to be ecumenical—part of an inclusive fellowship in the body of Christ that welcomes into our life and ministry the widest possible diversity of the human community. It is no accident that in this chapter on unity we find the Principles of Presbyterian Government. They remind us that the best way possible to discern the will of God is through a covenant community, led by elders and ministers who are elected by the



people of God, where we treasure shared power, majority rule, an ordered ministry, and a prayerful search together for the word of God for our life.

These core foundations are the gift of the Reformed tradition to our life together and are a huge blessing to the PC(USA) and to the church ecumenical. There is no better way to build up a church as the body of Christ than through living out this vision, which is our Presbyterian common ground. As we celebrate the 500th birthday of John Calvin in 2009, as well as the founding of our Reformed movement, it is important for us to reclaim these solid biblical foundations for our life and future together.

Making a Difference for Christ in This Nation

Presbyterians are heirs of a tradition that has never been comfortable with privatized religion. We have always understood that we are saved in order to be about God's project of transforming the world. From the very early days of this republic, Presbyterians have been active in supporting the cause of freedom, educating the young, and working for social righteousness. Missionaries such as Sheldon Jackson were remarkable people who not only preached the gospel and started a record number of churches across the West but also started a network of schools for native Alaskans and championed their civil and human rights. Others created schools across the South so that newly freed slaves might have a chance to make emancipation a truly liberating experience.

As Stated Clerk, I have learned in powerful ways that this tradition is alive and well today. My first act as Stated Clerk was to be sent with John Buchanan, Moderator of the 208th General Assembly (1996), to visit and express the support of the General Assembly to African Americans whose churches had been burned in the fires of racial hatred. I soon discovered that the denomination that offered more financial and volunteer support than any other for the rebuilding of black churches was the PC(USA). When my wife was director of the Louisville chapter of Habitat for Humanity, I made a similar discovery as to who built the most Habitat houses. Presbyterians again top the list when it comes to the most responses to domestic disasters and the most money collected for CROP (Comparative Research Programme on Poverty) drives.

I am convinced that there is something in the DNA of Presbyterians that make us a people committed to building a better world for all of God's people.



We are a people who make a difference not only in responding to social ills but also in sharing the gospel with people of other cultures right here in our midst. A few years ago, the General Assembly set ambitious goals for the PC(USA) to move toward being a truly multicultural church—and I have been pleased to see results beginning to happen. For example, the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta has forty-six new immigrant fellowships within its boundaries—a truly remarkable indication that we are serious about reaching out to people at our doorsteps who are from around the world. And this presbytery is not alone. The phenomenon is taking hold across our church. Probably the most inspiring conference I attend each year is the General Assembly’s multicultural conference. Here in great number is a gathering that looks like Pentecost and is filled with hope, joy, enthusiasm, and a sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Presbyterians do make a difference for Christ in this nation, and I am pleased to be a part of this great movement.

Making a Difference for Christ around the World

Having served as director of our denomination’s World Mission program for fifteen years, I am even more aware of the difference this church makes for Christ around the world. As Stated Clerk, I have been deeply involved with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), which is the global body of churches of the Reformed tradition. I remember arriving for the every-seven-years General Council of WARC at the Great Church in Debrecen, Hungary, in 1996. I was surprised when I entered the church and saw very few people who resembled me. I was foolish enough to ask a question to which I should have known the answer. I inquired of the person at the registration desk if the reason there were so many people at the gathering from Asia, Africa, and Latin America was because of some sort of affirmative action program to ensure representation from all parts of the world. I was quickly reminded that such was not necessary since two-thirds of the world’s Presbyterian and Reformed Christians now live in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. What a transformation of the Christian world community in the last 150 years!

While the dramatic growth of the church around the world must ultimately be credited to the Holy Spirit working through deeply committed Christians in countries around the world, at least a small part of this great revolution is due to the faithful commitment of Presbyterians to world mission over



the years. God has used these efforts in world mission to bring into being churches of great strength in places as diverse as Sudan, Korea, Brazil, and China. It is a tradition that continues today.

Early in 2008, I led a peacemaking delegation to Kenya, during which the evidence of this world mission involvement was on every hand. Ten PC(USA) presbyteries have partnerships with presbyteries in Kenya. Presbyterians have taken the lead, working with our Kenyan partners, to open a new Presbyterian University. Over the years, Presbyterians have been active in health care in Kenya. Most recently, Presbyterians have been present in responding to the humanitarian disaster growing out of the postelection violence in that country. We continue to have ten missionaries serving very effectively as partners in mission with the Kenyan church; however, in today's "flat world," the multitude of ways that PC(USA) presbyteries and congregations are involved in Kenya is almost impossible to count.

A similar story can be told in country after country.

The PC(USA) continues to be in partnership with strong and vibrant churches around the world to the benefit of Christian mission both there and here. Not long ago, an important consultation took place in Dallas, Texas, where people came together from a myriad of interest groups, organizations, mission-minded congregations, presbyteries, and partner churches. Diverse in many ways, those who gathered made a covenant to work together—encouraging the energy of each, while coordinating the work of all, so that we have a common mission strategy and are supportive of our partner churches around the world. I truly believe Presbyterians are more active in world mission, albeit in many new ways, than we have ever been in our history. Making a difference for Christ in our world continues to be a great strength of the PC(USA)!

The Crown Jewels of the PC(USA)

I was interested to hear Pastor Michael Lindvall refer to the ten seminaries related to our denomination as the crown jewels of the PC(USA). At first I thought that was a rather strange description. Upon further reflection, I think he is absolutely right. As part of a tradition that has always honored an educated ministry, as well as educated leaders and members, it is an incredible gift to the PC(USA) that we have ten such fine theological institutions. Each institution is very different in many ways, but all share common core values of academic



strength, a commitment to contextual theological education, a loyalty to the church, and a passion for training leadership to meet the multifaceted dimensions of ministry in the twenty-first century. These ten seminaries are looked on with envy by other communions and are a real source of strength for the PC(USA) and the church ecumenical.

Our seminaries are a source of strength for training a new generation of pastors and church leaders and for taking a variety of other initiatives to support the church and its ministry. Linda Valentine, Executive Director of the General Assembly Council, and I recently completed a series of consultations with most of these seminaries. For the consultations we asked each seminary to identify an area of particular passion or concern around which we could discuss together how to build partnerships between the seminary and General Assembly agencies. I was interested in the variety of topics that were chosen, as well as how those topics represent exactly the areas in which the church needs support for faithful ministry today.

Columbia Theological Seminary identified the area of evangelism and church growth. Union Theological Seminary/Presbyterian School of Christian Education chose, as you might imagine, Christian education. McCormick Theological Seminary selected multicultural ministry. San Francisco Theological Seminary focused on Christian vocation. Princeton Theological Seminary identified the subject of commissioned lay pastors. Pittsburgh Theological Seminary chose world mission. Austin Theological Seminary wanted to discuss strengthening Presbyterian and Reformed identity. Finally, Louisville Theological Seminary selected the topic of building partnerships between the seminary and the agencies of the church. Beyond their usual academic offerings, each seminary was making a great contribution to the church in these areas. Together they represent just the kind of resource for just the kind of challenges that the church faces today.

To Be Presbyterian Is to Be Ecumenical

One of the greatest strengths we have as Presbyterians is a gift that impacts others as well as ourselves—our deep ecumenical commitment. I think Robert McAfee Brown said it best in an article in what was then *Presbyterian Survey*. He made the bold claim, “I am Presbyterian; therefore, I am ecumenical” (*Presbyterian Survey*, September 1987). If mission is in the DNA of Presbyterians, so is ecumenism. Presbyterians have always been clear that we alone are not the entire church; we are but



one part of the church. To be whole, to be faithful as a church, we must always be seeking the unity of Christ's church. And we are doing just that!

In almost every community you will find Presbyterians among the leaders in the local council of churches, in Church Women United, and in myriad interchurch groups that work to build houses, feed the hungry, and care for those in need. The same is true at presbytery, synod, and General Assembly levels. We have been the founders and major supporters of national and global bodies such as the National Council of Churches of Christ, the World Council of Churches, and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. We have always joined movements seeking visible Christian unity. At the upcoming 218th General Assembly in San Jose, California, commissioners will be asked to approve four new covenant agreements that will bring us closer to unity with the Episcopal Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Moravian Church, and the Korean Presbyterian Church in America.

This propensity to ecumenism is especially important in a world being torn apart by violence and conflict that grow out of religion and ethnicity. At a meeting of the World Council of Churches Central Committee in 2003, Catholicos Aram I of the Armenian Apostolic Church, who was moderating the committee, made a brilliant presentation on the importance of ecumenism and interfaith relations in our time. He indicated that in the twentieth century the greatest threats to the peace and well-being of the world were the isms: Nazism, Communism, Fascism, capitalism, racism, sexism, and the like. However, he said that all of that has changed in the twenty-first century. Now, the greatest threats and the most violent conflicts all center on issues of ethnic and religious identity (in Northern Ireland, Bosnia and Kosovo, the Middle East, and so forth). In such a world, the ability to make peace and to cross the barriers not only of ethnicity but also of religious identity is crucial if the world is to have a future. The ability to be ecumenical people is a tremendous asset in our own nation and in the world and is one of the great gifts the PC(USA) has to offer.

Vital Congregations

Earlier in this essay, I commented that we have too many congregations that are living with a survival mentality. While that is true, as one who has the unique privilege of visiting a wide diversity of congregations all across the country, I can tell you



that the vast majority of our congregations are alive and well and seeking to faithfully live the Christian life.

The most promising sign of hope for the future of the PC(USA) is the thousands of remarkable congregations where the gospel is rightly preached, the sacraments are rightly administered, and the people of God are nurtured in Christian faith and mission.

I used to think it was just part of the script for Moderators of the General Assembly to talk about how encouraged they were from visiting Presbyterian churches and seeing so many signs of the Holy Spirit at work. But now I know that what they say is true. We have an incredibly diverse group of congregations, no doubt. However, the gift of the Holy Spirit cuts across all of that diversity to bring life and hope and the gospel to people in every context.

I witnessed this in one of our smallest churches, located in Eminence, Kentucky, where my daughter served as pastor right out of seminary. In addition to being a wonderful Christian fellowship, that church discovered a large Hispanic community in its own backyard that worked in the tobacco fields and had no serious connection to any church in that community. The Eminence congregation began a Wild and Crazy Kids program that brought new hope to the community and renewal to that tiny congregation.

A similar witness is taking place in one of our largest congregations—Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. You will find that many of the movers and shakers in Chicago attend this church. You will also discover that Fourth Church has an important outreach to the Cabrini-Green housing project, one of the poorest communities in the nation. More than that, Fourth Church has taken seriously its motto, “A Light to the City,” and offers powerful worship, intellectually challenging explorations into faith and ethics, and a passion to share the gospel in word and deed in Chicago, throughout the world, and in the broader family of the PC(USA).

Many congregations fall somewhere between First Presbyterian Church in Eminence and Fourth Presbyterian in Chicago. My wife and I worship in one of them, Springdale Presbyterian Church in Louisville. It has experienced slow and steady growth for the last decade. It is a five-hundred-member church made up of a considerable diversity of people and perspectives but with a deep love for one another and for the church. Like a growing number of churches, it has both a contemporary and a traditional service and is involved in all kinds



of mission outreach in Louisville. It is strongly committed to the PC(USA). Most of all, it is a place where the gospel is preached and lived, where people care for one another, and where the love of Christ both renews the congregation and leads its members into renewing the world.

In short, I believe in the future of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) because I see the Holy Spirit at work in our congregations.

The Future of the PC(USA)

My conviction about the future of the PC(USA) is not based on a naive assumption that all is well with our church. Far from it! If we are to have a viable future, we must turn around this four-decade-long trend of membership loss and start to grow the church spiritually, missionally, and numerically. We have to eschew the Reformed heresy of distrust, division, and discounting of one another and truly become a community that resembles the body of Christ. We must learn from Proverbs—“Where there is no vision, the people perish” (29:18a KJV)—and catch a fresh sense together that we can turn the world upside down for the gospel in our generation.

I believe we have the strength and resources to do just that.

- We have a vision in our Constitution of the church and its calling that is second to none, a renewing vision of Christian life together that grows out of the pages of the New Testament.
- We are part of a community that is making a difference for Christ in this nation.
- We are part of a community that is making a difference for Christ around the world.
- We have incredible resources to train the next generation of Christian leaders.
- We know at the core of our being that to be Presbyterian is to be ecumenical.
- We have a network of incredibly vital and faithful congregations where the Word is rightly preached, the sacraments rightly administered, and the people of God nurtured into a Christian community filled with the love of God.

One of the books that impacted me most in my early walk with Christ was the little volume by C. S. Lewis titled *The Screwtape Letters*. In this book, Screwtape (the devil) writes let-



ters to his agent Wormwood about how to tempt Christians and draw them away from God's work so that Screwtape can have his way in the world. What struck me when I read again these fictional letters was how the vast majority of the strategies that Screwtape proposed to Wormwood were in one way or another strategies to make Christians doubt themselves, focus on their shortcomings, and distrust their fellow Christians. For Screwtape, it was clear that if Wormwood could do that, the devil could have a field day.

Friends, I think we in the PC(USA) are being called to say a loud and strong *no* to Screwtape, Wormwood, and all of their contemporary colleagues and to reclaim our unity in Christ and our confidence in God and one another. We have challenges to face, but God has given us incredible gifts and strengths in the PC(USA) on which to build, and we need to be doing just that—building on these great gifts of our Presbyterian tradition and reality to shape a church for the twenty-first century that will truly be “the church reformed, always reforming,” according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit” (*Book of Order*, G-2.0200).





THE REV. DR. CLIFTON KIRKPATRICK was born in Texas and grew up in Tennessee. His ministry spans four decades to date: He worked for the Fort Worth/Greater Dallas Councils of Churches, was executive director of the Houston Metropolitan Ministries, and directed the agencies for world mission of the Presbyterian Church in the United States and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Kirkpatrick will finish his twelfth and final year as Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the PC(USA) in the summer of 2008. He has been named visiting professor of ecumenical studies and global ministries at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, beginning January 1, 2009. Active in ecumenism throughout his ministry, Kirkpatrick currently serves as president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. He also has been a member of the governing boards of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and the Council of Presidents, United States Chapter, of the World Conference on Religion and Peace.

He holds degrees from Davidson College, Yale University, and McCormick Theological Seminary and was a Merrill Fellow at Harvard University. In addition he has honorary degrees from Westminster College, Hannam University (Korea), and Silliman University (Philippines). He is coauthor of *What Unites Presbyterians: Common Ground for Troubled Times* and a contributor to *Presbyterians Being Reformed: Reflections on What the Church Needs Today* and *Conversations with the Confessions: Dialogue in the Reformed Tradition*, published by Geneva Press.

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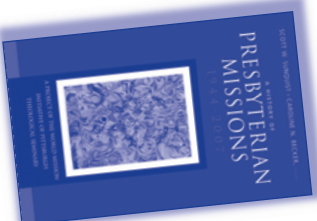
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