

2011-11-08 Presbytery Detox Project Team Progress Report

Dear Friends of Presbytery,

In September Morgan Murray gave the initial report of the so named 'detox' team to this Presbytery. That report referred to our desire to facilitate hope through health and to seek a constructive way forward beyond, even through the contentiousness we have faced and felt.

Staying with key questions

Since last Presbytery we met several times giving as much as three hours or more to listen and learn of our perceptions and expectations, realized and unrealized in our lived experience of SF Presbytery. In our continuing conversation we have sought to get underneath some of the key questions so defined in our last report. Those were:

- What is the next right thing for SF Presbytery to do to detox?
- Who are the conversation partners we need to do this work well?
- What kind of experiments can the detox team try that may serve as a model that includes us all?

As we entered into these extended times our reflections, comments and insights have gravitated toward the first and third questions.

What we've learned about what we consider required to discern the toxic and move forward are the following:

1. The presenting issues that are contentious hold hidden subtexts and subplots. Our awareness of these has emerged with increasing clarity. There are distinct concerns and tensions surrounding matters of conscience and a deep divergence exists in what we and our congregations understand faithfulness to Jesus Christ to be or not to be. The subtexts and subplots need to be wisely and graciously named.
2. To understand the subtexts and subplots will subsequently require a kind of listening that is very hard to practice. That form of listening involves a tenacious patience committed to comprehending with a depth and charity of the other. This difficult practice is veritable necessity when and especially when the perceived difference regarding faithfulness to Christ on matters of sexuality, justice, Holy Scripture and ordination is great.

3. To give an example of one kind of subtext or subplot would be to name the following dynamic that lies underneath so much of voice and vote. This is what might be appropriately named dualism. To remain in and reinforce a dualistic mindset of us/ them, winners/losers is doomed to increase hopelessness in our hearts and in our Presbytery. Herein we all lose whether we part and disassociate or remain in covenant. We lose the gracefulness of common gratitude in Christ and the saltiness of discerning God's wisdom. This implies that any mere structural vote up or down on matters of disagreement in and of itself is not the answer to our contentions given its penchant to preserve and reinforce a hidden dualism. Can we see another way to a better voice and a more beneficial vote even in the case of dismissals and departures? Could we be persuaded by God to see what is best, perfect and good (Romans 12.1,2) a perception that is now not in our grasp?
4. The strength and honesty, the very value of our conversations as a working group are directly related to where and when we have given permission to one another to speak frankly of the depth of our disagreements and our desires; be they ones of anxious fear or hope. However it stands now with us as a Presbytery, we believe this kind of permission among opposing voices is required if we can move into the future through the contentiousness to the clarity that God is calling us to see.

We Need a More Honest Assessment of our Mutual Contributions to the Toxicity

The future of our Presbytery raises questions which rob us of energy and focus. Answering them requires difficult conversations, and we may be tempted to conclude that there is nothing to gain, so there is no use in trying to have them. But in our last report the team expressed a desire "to create a context in which each of us can own our contribution... and then work as a whole toward reconciliation and ultimately, renewal". We are currently evaluating a model to help us accomplish this end. Whatever model we use, we are convinced it should be grounded in scripture, be directed toward glorifying God in our relationships, and be practically adaptable to the wild and wooly life of our Presbytery.

A Realistic Awareness of our Calling as a Project Group

We are mindful that our work is one of service and not by commission. Whatever we would bring before you will be shaped by this. Each one of us comes to the meetings with a level of faith, hope and love that is mixed with apprehension expressed in questions like what can we really do, or what impact can we truly make? Acutely aware of this we will continue to meet and will remain in need of your prayers of intercession for the conversations, plans and votes that stand in our future as a Presbytery of God's calling.

Submitted by the Detox Project Group of the SF Presbytery
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