Making Connections
with ROB ATKINS, Presbyer

Nearly all of our congregations are facing an inescapable financial reality. As the base population disappears from the pews through aging, death, and simple loss, the pool of money from which to draw shrinks. The church may retain a corps of inspired, energetic, and imaginative members, but the lack of money hamstrings them before they can really get started on their mission.

One main area where this really comes into play is within congregations undergoing a transition in pastoral leadership. The California housing market immediately puts limits on what sort of pastor a church might seek, where they might seek him or her, and how much will be left over for the ministries of the church beyond staff expense. For example, if someone were to move from the Southeast to take a call in Northern California, they would face the immediate issue that their $200K home there would not give them enough of a capital gain to purchase a home in an urban community where the average home price is north of $400K in California. Even with creative financing from supportive mid-councils, like equity sharing, it can still prove inadequate to meeting the real estate realities here.

The reality within the congregations quickly becomes the reality for the presbytery. Our accountant joyously shared with us that mission giving saw a 6% increase from 2016 to 2017; but almost in the same breath lamented that it would not take much of a financial crisis to exhaust what reserves we have. One church defaulting on a building loan, and we could be in real danger.

That reality means the presbytery does not have the resources to fund major programming through the budget. The budget is now a mechanism by which to meet immediate needs and overhead. We are creatively examining how legacy funds, designated accounts, and trusts can be used to continue funding what programming we do, though. That is a limited fix, however.

Hope comes as we begin to think about Per Capita and denominational mission giving in terms of the Feeding of the 5000 (cf. Luke 9:10-17) and Acts 2:42-47—the early community of Christ lived by generosity, sharing so everyone had enough.

I believe the true miracle of the 5000 was not Jesus performing some sort of magic act, waving his arms over the crowd, making bread spring from the ground, but that, instead, he tapped into the simple generosity of the people present. They found that they had more than they imagined once they saw the real need to be met. A small picnic could be shared. Shared picnics became a great feast with unimaginable leftovers.

Could the same work with Per Capita? It can if we filter it through Acts 2. Luke repeatedly stresses that the first community saw and met needs. They pooled all that they had so all would have enough. What a great model for

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presbytery to employ! Per Capita is not a tax. It is not a membership fee. It is caring for one another. It is how we take collective responsibility for one another, which is the embodiment of Christ’s compassion.

That being said, we now turn to the next item which will be key to our being able to embody the above about Per Capita…

Our member churches are extraordinary pools of energy, imagination, and commitment to being true communion within their communities. As such, they do not need for the presbytery to be a source for ideas on programs, missions, or projects. Instead, they need help, assistance, and resources for getting their programs, missions, and projects off the ground.

Even as bleak as some might consider our financial health at the moment, the presbytery still sits on a fairly deep pool of financial resources that can become deeper if we take to heart the Acts 2 mantra of having all things in common for the good of all and add to it the faith found in the 5000—what little we have can become an abundance as it inspires further generosity.

The more our presbytery committees can nourish and nurture congregational initiatives, the more engaged our churches can become in their communities. The more engaged they become, the more response they invite from their communities. That response becomes a door to making disciples, bringing the kingdom to our corner of the world, and allowing us to grow within and without as embody Jesus within the world.

Several of our smallest churches are in tiny, rural communities, truly and literally off the beaten path from anywhere. These congregations are claiming an ancient practice of the church—becoming the center of the village—the focal point for community life, compassion, and service. They actively pursue becoming places of education, outreach, feeding, compassionate care, etc. for their towns.

To accomplish that end, our committees need to continue their work of reorienting and refocusing their work. They need to become listening entities, hearing the stories being told by our churches. They need to respond to those stories, offering what is needed to keep them going. That means letting go of developing programs independent from the churches (offerings from on high, so to speak), and instead becoming avenues to funds (both our own here and opening gates to funds offered at the higher levels within the denomination); finding teachers, mentors, guides, etc. to help churches refine their ideas; and connecting congregations engaged in similar work with one another to share ideas, experiences, and lessons learned. That means someone on our committees needs to become fluent in General Assembly grants (what they are and how to get them). That means someone needs to continually scan our seminaries, other church organizations, and the General Assembly to see where the experts are. That means listening to folks in the churches to hear, see, and learn what they’re doing and point out other places where similar things are happening, helping them connect to one another to support, share ideas, and encourage one another.

In short, a scarcity can become an abundance.

But..

WE NEED TO PAY OUR PER CAPITA TO MAKE IT SO!