

Dear Friends in Christ,

My name is Steve Wilson and I am the Senior Pastor of Oakmont Presbyterian Church. I make no generic profession of faith but claim, by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, that Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior, to the Glory of God the Father.

You may be considering whether to leave the PCUSA. I am one of those evangelical pastors who would grieve your departure, who would suffer from your absence and the lack of your voice, and I am among those who pray that the Spirit will lead you to choose that faithful alternative of staying within the PCUSA. Rather than be separated from each other because we disagree, I would rather that we remain family and struggle together. I am a pastor and I would like to raise some pastoral questions for you to consider.

1. We can agree that our denomination is divided on important theological issues. We have spent much energy and time on those issues. *Do the current weaknesses of our denomination necessarily mean that we are to realign our congregations or create a new denomination?* For me, the answer is no.

God's covenant with us reflects God's longsuffering and perseverance with us. Consider one example of that love of which there are many examples. After a stunning rejection of the God who had liberated the Hebrew people from Egypt, God did not reject the desert idolaters. God rejected their *idolatry* and maintained the covenant relationship. Indeed, while *WE* were yet sinners, Christ died for our *SINS*, that we might be forgiven, repent, and live holy lives in service to our Lord. Every time we enter our sanctuaries and see the cross, we remember God did not claim any righteous right by which he rejected an unholy people. Rather God took the form of a servant and became obedient even to the point of death. In the face of repeated sin, God remained in covenant love with the people. In time, our savior said, "As I have loved you, so love one another."

We depend on such covenant love with God and with one another. After a long spiral of decline in addiction, a friend called and asked me to take him to a rehabilitation center. During our 30 minute drive he described for me his humiliation and shame. In addition to his addiction, he had manipulated and hurt family and friends in order to maintain his chemical habit. As a result, he eventually lost his self-respect and the confidence just to get out of bed and face the day. But, on the day of our drive to rehab, he was moved to begin recovery because he trusted that God had not given up on him. *Should not our perseverance with our denominational family of faith reflect God's perseverance with us?*

2. Among the thoughtful reflections and considerations of the New Wineskins leaders is the stated purpose of theological unity. Theological unity has a great attraction to me. The practical part of me, however, remembers that theological dis-unity has been a challenge to the church in all ages. Jesus' prayer for unity (John 17) tips us off that dis-unity would be a problem for the Church. And Jesus was right. There was the first generation disagreement of Peter and Paul over the place of Hebrew laws for ritual purity. The generations of Christians in the 3rd and 4th centuries fought fiercely over the person and nature of Jesus. Students of Christian history point

to theological disagreements of the church that took four or five or eight hundred years to resolve.

Given that theological conflicts seem to find the church, *can one honestly hope that a theological unity will long endure, even if now fervently held?* In an age that is rapidly changing, is it not likely that new challenges will arise? To leave in hope of enduring theological purity is to hope against the history of the church and human nature.

3. Finally, *is not reform happening even now...even within the PCUSA?* About 11 years ago Presbytery leaders envisioned for Pittsburgh Presbytery a reformed identity with reformed values. It had been generally true that congregations had existed to support the mission of Pittsburgh Presbytery. The Spirit led us to a vision of the Presbytery where the Presbytery existed to strengthen congregations as evidenced by:

- Effectiveness in bringing others to Christ
- Participation in the mission of Christ, and
- Vibrancy in worship

That reformed vision was adopted and embraced by our Presbytery. We have committed our resources to that, and it is bearing fruit for the kingdom.

Such reform is not only happening at our Presbytery. About that same time, the PCUSA, Pittsburgh Seminary, and other leaders were asking how we can advance the mission of Jesus Christ. They determined that they would train world Christian pastors who will mobilize the Church for mission. The PCUSA contributed \$85,000 to support the formation of the World Mission Initiative. Last year my congregation supported students learning about mission in Vietnam. This year, at the invitation of Dr. Bill Carl, the President of PTS, a PCUSA world mission conference was hosted in Pittsburgh. The conference addressed reforms necessary for effective outreach in this new day of mission when more congregations are sending missionaries and supporting them directly. Evangelicals are holding office in Louisville and in our presbyteries, walking the halls, and sharing in the direction of the PCUSA more now than at anytime in my life.

So here is my final question for you: *is it not possible that the good work done by the New Wineskins leaders may be intended by God, not for a departure, but for the further reformation within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), its pastors and its congregations?*

With other evangelical pastors in Pittsburgh Presbytery, I pray that God will lead to you chose the faithful alternative of remaining within our family of faith. I believe that such action and your continuing presence would be a determined vote for even greater PCUSA reform.

Steve Wilson
Oakmont Presbyterian Church
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