

CHAPEL HILL

July 13, 2011 Congregational Gathering

Rev. Lynn Longfield, General Presbyter, Presbytery of Olympia

Good evening everybody. I have been the General Presbyter of Olympia Presbytery for 13 years now and as you can well imagine, this present reality is the most difficult situation both organizationally and relationally that I have had to face in all my years of ministry. Yet I have a deep and abiding awareness of the presence of God and trust indeed that all things will work together for good for those who love God and are called according to God's purpose. You and I, all of us, are in good hands. No need for high anxiety.

Firstly, I really affirm your commitment to discerning the movement of the Spirit and your determination to discover and follow the will of Christ. I want to assure you that Presbytery's interest is to bring into that discernment process a companionship in prayer and scripture study and, to seek a sense of balance of perspective and information that will lead to clarity of both the issues and costs at play for all of us as we travel this road together. The goal of the Presbytery is NOT to persuade Chapel Hill to stay, nor is it to advocate for a change somehow in your theological position or perspective.

I was quite taken with Jim's talk on Authority and Interpretation of Scripture at your last meeting. It made me want to let you know of my experience in Olympia Presbytery and the PC(USA) in general. The vast majority of your brothers and sisters in Christ in this denomination hold a very high sense of the authority of scripture. Difference arises in the interpretation and application of Scripture. We all interpret and apply Scripture, and we can differ in the way we do so.

Let me share a little bit of my own story. From the time I was very young, scripture has shaped my life. Scripture's authority and my understanding of it has determined where I live (I live in the Hilltop of Tacoma), what I do, how I am in relationship with others, how I earn, spend, invest and give away my money, how I treat my friends, how I treat my enemies, how I understand justice and compassion and mercy and forgiveness and respect for those different from me. My life has been irrevocably shaped and continues to be

shaped by the Prophets, Matthew 25, Luke 4, the Beatitudes, the Great Commandment, the Great Commission, Pentecost, just to name a few passages --- and by *Romans 1:16 – I am not ashamed of the Gospel, IT is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith*. I approach not one verse of the Bible with a cavalier heart. What varies perhaps from many of you, though, is the way I interpret some portions of scripture. I am not unique among those who would affirm 10A or among those who wish to stay in the PC(USA) even though they voted against 10A. In fact, I think I am pretty typical. We, like you, are people who hold Scripture as their highest authority and prayerfully and intentionally are shaped by it. We are the kind of people from whom Chapel Hill is considering whether to withdraw. I just want you to know that.

Withdrawal may be necessary and may even be the will of God for Chapel Hill, but please do not leave to get away from something but rather to move toward something you can wholeheartedly affirm and want to be part of in your deepest heart of hearts. Choose where you want to go because you affirm what another denomination holds as essential. Choose where you want to go because you wholeheartedly believe to be *non-essential* what they believe to be non-essential. If your strongest impulse for changing denominations is to get away from the PC(USA) rather than to become a part of something you really affirm as a whole church -- then you will not thrive. I have seen that dynamic play out badly in example after example of people leaving congregations in disgruntlement and disagreement – only to find that the old identity, as the “unhappy ones” somehow has become part of their DNA and they do not thrive. Do not let that happen to you. If you go (and that, thankfully is not a foregone conclusion), go with a full hearted affirmation of the denomination to which you are going and fully respect the covenant you make with them ---- for the long haul. Make sure that you are shaped by who you are called to be, and rather than by whom you are not.

I want you to know that the Presbytery of Olympia has a deep commitment to hearing all voices --- but the Presbytery will NOT foment dissent if the majority and leadership of this congregation seek to leave. The Presbytery is concerned for those who wish to remain within the PC(USA) and will work with them at the end of the discernment process to assist in their relocating to another church, or if sufficient in number and desire to remain a witness to PC(USA) in

Gig Harbor, we will make their mission and ministry part of the concern of an Administrative Commission.

Unity is not the highest value. It is A very high value though -- after all Scripture is full of the words of Jesus and St. Paul, begging us to live in unity with one another for the sake of our witness to the world. Even so, it is not the highest value. The main purpose of the church is not to bring people together but to bring people to Christ. I have spent my vocation seeking unity, encouraging people to work across their divisions, sometimes trying to hold people together by sheer force of will. It may be that God has another journey in mind. We may not be able to live out the provisional unity God would have us live out here on earth; I accept that, even as I affirm our eternal unity as brothers and sisters in Christ. (Yet – I still hold out for miracle.)

In any case, the Presbytery's goal is this -- at the far end of this process, the Presbytery prays that there will be a strong sense of the confirmation of the Spirit about what action should be taken AND that we all will have the courage and grace to follow where Christ leads. The Presbytery wants Chapel Hill to be in a position to move forward with vitality and effectiveness and wants the same for the Presbytery as a whole. We want the same for those in this congregation who may want to stay in the PC(USA) even if the majority wants to leave. The Presbytery's hope is that whether a particular congregation chooses to leave or to stay we will have all achieved a closer relationship and respect for one another. Most importantly our goal is that God be glorified in our process, behavior and outcome. May it be so.

God Bless you.