

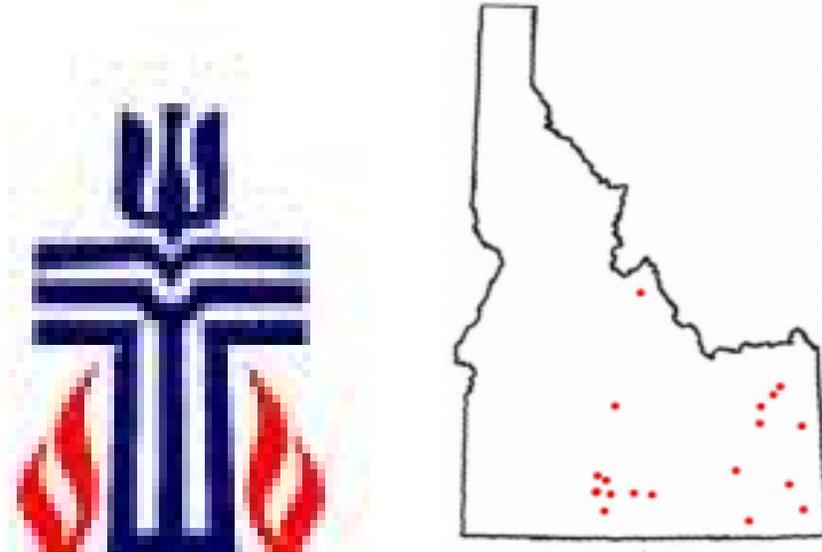
THE KENDALL CONSTELLATION

A Newsletter of Kendall Presbytery

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office 208-242-3800



“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” (II Corinthians 3:17)



Please forward this to all your friends in Kendall Presbytery.

Dear Friends & Colleagues in Christ's Service,

One of the things that goes along with being in middle governing body service (Presbytery & Synod work) is gaining access to what is often referred to as a "balcony view." This refers to the vantage point of surveying many churches and manifestations of "Church" at the same time. That balcony view, if used properly, can provide insights and observations that may prove helpful to people in the pews and pulpits of the individual churches.



(The view from the balcony of First Presbyterian, Twin Falls, ID)

One such observation that has occurred to me since I began serving in Kendall Presbytery is a general desire on the part of many for conformity throughout the larger Church. Many have noticed much diversity throughout the Church and have thought that some of this diversity is a weakness - that we would be stronger if we all did things in a similar same way or thought the same way, particularly about various controversial subjects. Of course, controversy has always existed in the

Church, since the days of the Apostles, and not all controversies were a simple matter of who was right and who was wrong. There were many times when both sides (or the several sides) were all wrong in some way and it is amazing to discover how often the various “sides” needed each other to discover newly emerging truths. The several sides often each possessed a portion, not the whole, of what God was in the process of revealing to us.

The theology we know and accept today took years in development, much of it through trial and error. In some cases, the conclusion came about not through logic or persuasion, but because of the un-Christlike behavior of some of the participants. Some self-styled “inspired leaders” ex-communicated the entire Church when they did not readily agree with them. Such judgmental, un-loving behavior was often the only clear evidence that they were on the wrong path or that they were imbibing of the wrong spirit - a dire warning to those of us who are convinced we are right and seem unable to deal kindly toward those with whom we disagree.

In regard to conformity, I think it valuable to remember that the Reformed Faith emerged from a non-conformist movement in England and elsewhere. Presbyterians were famous for resisting a set pattern of worship or a set pattern of theology beyond the core teachings of Christianity as exemplified and expressed in the Nicene Creed, for example. Even when much more specific doctrinal formulae were adopted, they often proved over time to be out of sync with the Reformed Faith. The Westminster Standards, for example, are now regarded as Puritan confessions rather than Reformed confessions, per se. Their “puritanical” treatment of the Sabbath, for example, is out of touch with Calvin’s theology of the Sabbath which was ever about re-creation and renewal rather than strict prohibitions in its emphasis. For Calvin, the Sabbath was emblematic of the “rest” we obtain in salvation by trusting in Christ and thereby “ceasing from our labor” (see Hebrews chap. 4).

Conformity, in the Church and elsewhere, cannot be obtained or implemented except at the expense of freedom. And without freedom, there can be no real innovation or renewal. Without renewal, even the best expressions and practices of religion and piety will gradually grow stale and lifeless. Lifeless faith is not faith at all, but a pitiful mockery of it and an evidence that we have quenched the Spirit, who alone can breathe life into the Church which is Christ’s body.

Our polity intentionally endures many inconveniences and annoyances in order that freedom may be preserved at all costs, especially the freedom of a preacher to

proclaim the gospel without fetters or fears. Say what you will about the PC(USA) and its never-ending parade of annoying controversies, despite all our faults we have something going for us that few others can claim: A Presbyterian pastor experiences a freedom in the pulpit almost unprecedented in Church history. The Book of Order even specifically prohibits a local Session from interfering in a pastor's sermon preparation and delivery as well as certain other aspects of worship (of course, they always retain the right to fire the pastor, if necessary):

Book of Order

“The teaching elder as pastor has certain responsibilities which are not subject to the authority of the session. In a particular service of worship the pastor is responsible for (1) the selection of Scripture lessons to be read, (2) the preparation and preaching of the sermon or exposition of the Word, (3) the prayers offered on behalf of the people and those prepared for the use of the people in worship, (4) the music to be sung, (5) the use of drama, dance, and other art forms.” (W-1.4005, a)

Even in an independent, non-denominational congregation the pastor would likely not enjoy such a level of freedom, at least not for very long. It is core to our polity that we entrust the future of the Church, its purity and progress in godliness of all forms, not to our own devices or written rules or standards, but to the rule of the Holy Spirit in the context of the unfettered preaching of the Word of God. We willingly and intentionally endure all inconveniences in order to assure ourselves and our children of the benefits of this freedom.

Conformity is the antithesis of freedom; therefore to demand conformity in an effort to purify the Church is a false effort. Only the Holy Spirit can govern the Church aright. Only in a context of freedom can the truth thrive. With freedom comes many annoyances and inconveniences, even some consternation at times, but it is a price we have traditionally been willing to pay for the best of all reasons - we entrust the rule of the Church to the Holy Spirit, not to ourselves or any device at our disposal.

From the balcony, I would like to say to all those who are clamoring for conformity in order that the Church might thereby be purified - think again ... better yet, pray some more about this.

In Christ's Love,
Ron Lavoie, EP/SC