



October 2021 Co-Executive Presbyters Report

TRANSITIONS

I've been struck recently by 1 Samuel 8. Samuel is trying to hand off his role to his sons and it's going horribly, so the elders of Israel come to Samuel and say they want a change. The problem is that they don't just want different leaders, they want a whole different leadership structure -- in other words, they don't just NOT want judges anymore, they want something new -- kings. This is where it gets interesting because we're told that the request for a king is a rejection of God (as king), yet (oddly) God tells Samuel (3x -- an echo of when he first learned to hear God's voice) to "listen" to Israel and give them what they want.

What I love about this passage is the way the scriptures have no problem not resolving the tension of this transition and allowing it to be a little ambiguous and messy. What I mean by that is that not only are there some interesting seams in the telling of the story, but even way back in Deuteronomy 17 Moses basically tells Israel "when the time comes for you to have a king, here is how the king should act." So for Moses, kings are a natural (faithful?) progression of Israel's development of a nation, but here in 1 Samuel, we're told (ostensibly) Israel is being unfaithful. So which is it? Is it one or the other, or could it be both, or could it be both, and?

The truth is that change is both hard and necessary for growth. Eventually, in every healthy organization decisions must be made to let go of an old way of being in order to embrace a new way of living. For Israel, the old leaders and their leadership model (judges) was not working, and a new approach (kings) was necessary to meet the challenges ahead. Israel was not the same people (large family tribes) it was many years ago, they were different now -- they had changed -- and they needed to organize themselves differently to grow into the nation they were becoming.

Would God be as close to Israel under kings and God was under judges? For some (Samuel and God in 1 Samuel 8) the answer was clearly no. For others (Moses and God in Deuteronomy 17) it was a qualified yes -- kings could be faithful leaders provided they humbled themselves and followed the Torah. Was the transition to kings a necessary change that Israel had to make as a nation? Probably. The key to me is that all this can be true AND none of this prevents or limits God's power AND, in hindsight, God had no problem raising up leaders in the future both within and without the kingship to speak powerfully to the people to remind them of God's faithfulness, holiness, and covenant with them (think the prophetic tradition). What I really appreciate is that the scriptures are not afraid to record for us both the messiness of this transition and the necessity of its progress.

What Eliana and I (and others who have been working on these transitions for some time now) believe is that this is exactly the situation we're in the coming years in Seattle Presbytery -- that there are some transitions ahead that will be a bit messy, but it's these transitions that will allow us to live more faithfully into our work as a presbytery in the future.

SEATTLE FIRST/PRESBYTERY FOUNDATION

As has been mentioned before, our presbytery is reaching the end of a long, difficult transition that was perhaps inevitable. The light of Seattle First Presbyterian Church burned strong and bright for a time, but that light has no more illumination to offer as a congregation. It's true, the Administrative Commission (AC) had hoped to fan the flame of a new congregation (and took many steps in this direction) but COVID took even those small embers away. The good news is that in life and death we belong to God, and as Seattle First concludes its congregational witness, it is still seeking to support the larger work of the presbytery. In this way Seattle First can continue to offer support to the churches it helped establish, but in a way that's entirely different from its past. Thus, the legacy of Seattle First will live on as a foundation -- in a supporting role, not for its own mission, but for the mission of its presbytery. This is the way the Seattle First AC feels it can best honor the legacy of Seattle First - by supporting the presbytery's day to day work AND its long term initiatives around congregational transformation and community development.

OUR PRESBYTERY

So over the next year or so, the leadership and staff of Seattle Presbytery will be exploring how we can best utilize the support resources that Seattle First offers going forward. As we wrap up the operations of Seattle First as a congregation, those energies (of AC and staff) can be redirected toward the operations / mission of the presbytery. Relating to the work / mission of the presbytery (mentioned above), these are the areas we've identified as our first priorities: improving our financial oversight, hiring a property manager or property management services, pursuing the redevelopment of presbytery properties (with input/direction from the property discernment team), and continuing to support our congregations and communities through (larger) grants and long range initiatives (Seattle Urban Academy).

Financial Administration

Thankfully this first part is already done. Thanks to funds already committed by Seattle First, DeAmber Clopton is now our full time Finance Director. This addresses a huge need in financial oversight that we've had for a while and ensures that we not only stay on top of our financial operations (\$100M in assets), but it gives us the skills and abilities to advise our congregations in the area of bookkeeping, accounting, and financial management. The long term goal is that as soon as we've established a new and improved financial process within the presbytery, we'll be able to increase our ability to help our churches with their financial process.

Property Management

Another area of need is property management. Property management has long taken too much time from our staff -- time that we should be directed to our congregations and their leaders. For a long time we've performed the basics of property management, but the support foundation gives us the ability to better manage the properties through an additional employee or third party management. Both ideas are being looked into as we speak. As soon as we find a solution here, we'll be able to devote ourselves to the bigger questions that the management of these properties begs: what is the long term plan?

Redevelopment of Property

The real question going forward is what does a presbytery do with surplus church properties? The default idea that lurks in the mind of many a presbytery is that old church buildings should be used to house new congregations. That may work in very limited situations, but it doesn't address the real dynamics that are going on in congregations today -- and that is that even healthy and growing congregations are deeply rethinking the value of the traditional church building (single purpose / once a week use) -- in other words, the traditional church building often fails to address the needs of the communities in which they're located. If we allowed ourselves to think about our communities first -- what kind of buildings would we build now, or would we even have traditional church buildings at all? The question of what we do with vacant church buildings is multilayered and needs deep reflection before we move too quickly. Community needs like housing, 3rd spaces, and church/community partnerships is high and if we are to engage in that level of discussion as a presbytery, we need to not only get the short term property management questions resolved, but we need to invest some resources into the creative community development / partnership conversations that are happening all around us. The support foundation of Seattle First is ready to support this effort as well.

Grants & Initiatives

Developing a sustainable model for larger grants for our congregations has always been the desire of the Executive Board. Seattle Presbytery is engaged in at least two long term initiatives: Thriving Congregations and Seattle Urban Academy. The good news is that the Thriving Congregations program is funded for the next three years through a Lilly Grant. But what we need to do now is develop a way of sustaining both this program and any larger grants (former Transformational Grants) to ensure that we sustain this community engagement and congregational revitalization effort for years to come. Developing a robust congregational grant program to go with the Thriving Congregations program is the next step -- the good news is that we have the funds to do it.

Developing a new approach for the Seattle Urban Academy has taken much longer and is harder than it originally appeared. That said, the EB still sees a way forward, but it will take a bit of reorganizing, investment, and time. The support foundation can help provide long term support for this effort.

2022 PER CAPITA BUDGET

For budgeting purposes, it's important to know that the leadership of the Executive Board, the members of the Seattle First AC, and the staff are all beginning to live into some of these changes in the hope that they will be transformative for our congregations and the communities we serve. The easiest way to understand these changes going forward is that there are two main operations or areas of work: the first is the day to day (per capita) ministry of the presbytery, and the second is the long term (investment/foundation) work of the presbytery. The day to day ministry is what most people encounter on a regular basis -- congregational transitions, leadership support, presbytery meetings, committee work, engagement with the national church, etc. The long term ministry is what we do on a day to day basis to invest in the future of our congregations and communities which includes enhancing our grant program, sustaining the Thriving Congregations program (post Lilly funds), investing in the redevelopment of presbytery properties (and their management), managing the assets of the presbytery (\$100M), and supporting EB initiatives like reestablishing the Seattle Urban Academy.

Progress in both of these areas is essential for the future of our presbytery, and thanks to the thoughtful leadership of our presbytery (EB, Seattle First AC, staff), we are now aligning our resources towards these presbytery goals. In terms of the Co-EP model, this means that Eliana and Scott share the responsibility for leading the whole presbytery in both areas but each have a focus area where they spend most of their time: Eliana on the day to day ministry of the presbytery, and Scott on the long term work of the presbytery. That said, each is fully available to congregations and their leaders and consult with each other on a daily basis. Together, they manage and direct presbytery staff.

All this being said, in terms of the 2022 budget, we're happy to share that the EB is recommending a \$40 per capita for the 14th year in a row and is planning to offer a 3 month per capita waiver for the 3rd year in row.

CONGREGATIONAL & PASTORAL SUPPORT

It goes without saying that in the midst of all this, we continue to support and resource congregations on pastoral transitions, conflict resolutions, and missional discernment.

We welcome Revs. Reggie Avant (Madrona Grace) and Rob Wilson (North Point) to Seattle Presbytery, and say goodbye to Rev. Jeff Lincicome as he takes a call in Michigan. We give God thanks for these and all our pastoral leaders.

We invite you to keep the following churches in prayer as they continue their distinctive journeys of discernment: Rolling Bay, Lake City, Sammamish, Trinity, Woodland Park, Newport, Korean Pilgrim, and Northminster.

We are blessed to have the right staff for this right time to engage in the work God has called us to. May we all continue to lean into one another as we do this work of mission and ministry together.