

# The Layman

RAISING THE STANDARD

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*Analysis: ECO/FOP*

## Three sneezes (and a gesundheit)

By **Carmen Fowler LaBerge**  
The Layman

ORLANDO, Fla. – I came away from the 2013 national meeting of The Fellowship of Presbyterians (FOP) and ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians held in Orlando, Fla., with three impressions captured in three images: a rearview mirror, an interstate exit ramp and a taut umbrella.

### The rearview mirror

Just 18 months ago the Fellowship was formed during a gathering in Minneapolis. Six months later, the FOP gave birth to a new Reformed body called ECO. On Jan. 31, 2013, that new denomination held its first synod meeting. ECO is now home to 28 congregations with an additional 48 actively in the process of joining. Another 75-100 congregations are said to be in the discernment process, considering realigning denominational affiliation from the Presbyterian Church (USA).

For those in ECO the PCUSA is already fully in the rearview mirror and shrinking fast on the horizon. They are enthusiastically moving on. They are very energized, highly collegial, and joyfully working to redefine what it looks like to be faithful Presbyterians in an ever-changing world. But the context of ECO is not the context of the FOP, which leads us to the second image.

### An overcrowded interstate exit ramp

Have you ever sat on the interstate unable to get to the exit ramp because the traffic that is not exiting is completely stopped? It can be very frustrating. Our particular interstate exit ramp is crowded with four kinds of ECO/FOP churches. First, there are those who have exited. Second, there are those who want to make their way into ECO, and they see the FOP as an exit ramp to the new reality. Third, there is the vast majority of churches in the FOP who are parked there for good. They plan to stay in the PCUSA. They do not

For more articles on the 2013 gathering of the Fellowship of Presbyterians and ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians, visit [www.layman.org](http://www.layman.org)

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### Malibu Presbyterian Church

## Rising from the ashes

By **Nathan Key**  
The Layman

Just as the mythological phoenix rose from the ashes, so, too, has Malibu Presbyterian Church in California.

More than five years after a devastating wildfire consumed the church building and all its property, members attended their first worship service in a new sanctuary. On Sunday, Jan. 27, they left their temporary facilities and began holding services in their new building.

“Obviously, we’re thrilled, excited and can’t wait to be in (the new sanctuary),” said Greg Hughes, senior pastor of Malibu Presbyterian Church. “We feel like we have been wandering in the wilderness for a while, and we look forward to being on solid ground again.”



All rights reserved by Malibu Presbyterian Church  
A Bible, recovered from the fire, is presented to Pastor Michael Mudgett.

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# Gibbons to FOP/ECO: God is able

By Paula R. Kincaid  
The Layman

ORLANDO, Fla. – *“Pussycat, pussycat, where have you been?”*

*“I’ve been up to London to visit the Queen.*

*“Pussycat, pussycat, what did you do there?”*

*“I frightened a little mouse under her chair.”*

“Sometimes in the Presbyterian church we are so focused on the mouse under the chair, we forget Who sits on the throne,” said Rev. Dr. Richard Gibbons. “We forget that love, that sovereign, providential love that allowed Christ to come into the world.”

Gibbons was speaking at a worship service of the Fellowship of Presbyterians (FOP) and ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians gathering held Jan. 30-Feb. 1 in Orlando, Fla.

He noted that there was a mixed group attending the event: “Some have been blessed,” he said, “and others of us have come with deep, profound questions about the future of our denomination.”

Gibbons is the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Greenville, S.C., which was dismissed from the Presbyterian Church (USA) into ECO on Aug. 18, 2012, by Foothills Presbytery.

His Scripture text was Ephesians 3:14-21, the Apostle Paul’s prayer for the church of Ephesus:

*For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of His glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen.*

“Don’t you long for that power this evening ... that kind of power in our congregations, denominations, in this generation?” he asked.

The Apostle Paul was laying out the power of the Holy Spirit in his prayer, just as he had demonstrated it earlier in his letter:

*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us*

*alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. (Eph. 2:1, 4-5)*

“Understand that this unregenerate man or woman is not just misinformed. He or she is lost and dead in sin and only the power of the Holy Spirit at work can transform, renew and transform that life,” he said. “Our own Reformed heritage teaches us this ... The power of the Gospel is such that it does not offer liberation, it liberates. It does not offer regeneration, it regenerates. ... You were once lost and blind and dead in sin, but because of His great love, God in His great mercy made us alive in Christ.”

Gibbons then spoke about his own death to life experience when he suffered a heart attack in 2005. When the paramedics arrived, he had no pulse and was not breathing. He was shocked four times before his heart started beating again. He was taken to the hospital and stayed in ICU for several days.

“On a Sunday morning, they took me off life support, off the medication and slowly, surely I came back,” Gibbons said, adding that he had no memory of the events, including the five days before and after the heart attack.

“What I know is this, as I lay dead on Sept. 13, 2005, First Presbyterian Church in Greenville, S.C. was praying for a pastor,” he said, and once again referred to the beginning of Eph. 2, “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins ... But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ.”

“That is the power of the Gospel,” he said. “Don’t we long for such a power in our lives? Don’t we long for a church that takes us away from meetings, agendas and votes? They are only helpful when they are enabling ministry not restricting ministry.”

Referencing something he said he has learned from Darrell Guder, Gibbons said that there are two types of churches.

“The one is more or less passive, yielding to influences from outside. The other is active, influencing rather than being influenced,” Gibbons said. “That’s the kind of church I long to belong to.”

“I have discovered again, and again, a number of us are deeply frustrated with the status quo. We recognize that this is not the hour of apathy or indifference,” he said.

Gibbons advocated for a church that was Biblical in its thinking, missional in its ministry and intentional in its action.

“Paul writes to remind us of the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives,” Gibbons said, and Paul reminds Christians to “grasp how long and wide and deep is the love of Christ.”

Gibbons said that God’s love is wide enough that infinity cannot encompass it and depravity cannot exhaust it.

“How deep is the Father’s love for us,” he said, “how vast beyond all measure that He should send His only son to make a wretch His treasure.”

The Apostle Paul hoped that the Ephesians and all Christians since that time, would “gasped for breath when they read that prayer,” said Gibbons, “and find a glimpse of that love

and be lost in wonder, love and praise. ... That is what Paul is thinking here, and he doesn’t stop there. He takes another step, to one of the greatest passages in all of Scripture:

*Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen. Eph. 3:20-21*

“That is the power of God at work,” he said.

For those that came to the FOP/ECO gathering struggling and discouraged, Gibbons said “Please go home and remember this truth: He is able.”

“If you are defeated, ashamed of your own sin,” he said, “begin again. Understand the truth of this word: He is able. ... Struggling with fear and uncertainty? He is able. Willing to walk the narrow road? He is able. Looking for Biblical leaders? He is able.”

“He is able to do immeasurably more than I can ask for or imagine,” Gibbons said. “There is no barrier too high, no valley too deep, no dream too extreme, or no challenge too great for Him.”

“God is able.”

**“Sometimes in the Presbyterian church we are so focused on the mouse under the chair, we forget Who sits on the throne. We forget that love, that sovereign, providential love that allowed Christ to come into the world.”**

**Rev. Dr. Richard Gibbons**

# Addressing the rumor that the PCUSA is going out of business

**Analysis by Carmen Fowler LaBerge**  
The Layman

According to the recently released Comparative Statistics 2011, the Presbyterian Church (USA) continues its decline, but like a person reading his or her own obituary might say, “rumors of my death have been grossly exaggerated.” Institutions are inherently self-preserving.

The report contains numbers that are now more than a year old. So this analysis will look both at the data and trends over time.

## Congregations

Based on reporting done by congregations one year ago, 5,517 or 53 percent of the denomination’s congregations have 100 members or less. In most presbyteries, that means that the majority of the PCUSA’s existing congregations would not qualify to be chartered as new churches.

For the four years 2008-2011, the denomination *closed or dissolved* churches at a rate of 75-80 per year. It is expected that number will accelerate. If the experience of Presbyterians is like that of other former mainline denominations, one might expect upward of 2,500 PCUSA churches to be closed in the next decade due to death and demographics.

If each of the 173 presbyteries closed one church a year, the PCUSA would have 1,730 fewer congregations in 10 years. If they each closed an average of two churches/year, that number rises to 3,460 fewer churches in 2022.

Which churches are likely to be closed? According to the PCUSA’s Research Services:

- 0-6 members: 129 PCUSA congregations
- 7-10 members: 156 PCUSA congregations
- Less than 25 members: 1,218
- Less than 58 members: 3,507.

The number of *dismissals* indicated in the PCUSA’s comparative statistical report (21 in 2011) does not square with information from other sources. *The Layman* list includes more than 40 churches that realigned in 2011.

The EPC has taken in more than 200 former PCUSA congregations in the past five years. So where’s the truth? Part of that difference may be accounted for by the fact that the PCUSA does not recognize congregations that disaffiliated from the PCUSA and the year-end reporting by congregations to the PCUSA lags a full year behind the reality being reported online.

The fact that hundreds of congregations are actively seeking to leave the PCUSA for either the EPC or ECO is not a secret. What is unknown is how many of those congregations will actu-

ally leave and when. Executive presbyters indicate that the number of disaffected churches is around 600.

*The Presbyterian Outlook* recently reported that sources in Louisville tell them the rate is now five per week.

## Membership

Looking at Table 1 of the Comparative Statistical report, the PCUSA is declining by about 60,000 members per year. At that loss rate, the PCUSA would cease to exist in 32.5 years. However, we all know Presbyterians who will most certainly still be around in 32 years, so it’s not quite that simple.

In 2011 the PCUSA’s membership fell for the first time below 2-million (1,972,287) and will likely be 1.5-million by the 2016 General Assembly. That estimate is reached by taking into account three factors: church closures, church dismissals/disaffiliations, and the non-membership nature of new worshipping communities who use the metric of participation, not membership.

Table 1 of the Comparative Statistics exposes the reality of shrinking congregations. Years 2012 through 2016 have been added as a projection of the 10-year trend of the average size of a PCUSA congregation contracting by 2-3 members/year. (*see chart below*)

Combining the trends of church closures, denominational departures and congregational decline, a realistic projection of 1,447,639 members at the end of 2016 is warranted.\* The PCUSA will likely enter 2017 with 8,668 congregations with an average membership of 167 and total membership under 1.5 million.

(\*Assuming: Each presbytery closes an average of 1.5 church per year, another 100 churches per year are dismissed/disaffiliate, and churches continue to decline in overall membership at the 10-year trend rate.)

Some suggest that the denomination find a different metric than membership. But as one pastor once said, “Numbers matter to me because people matter to God.”

Let us not forget that the early church viewed numeric growth as a sign of the Lord’s hand of favor. Acts 11:21 says, “The Lord’s hand was with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.”

The Comparative Statistics 2011 report can be found at [www.pcusa.org/resource/comparative-statistics-2011](http://www.pcusa.org/resource/comparative-statistics-2011)

## Big churches

Table 6 of the report is worth a look. Of the 15 largest congregations based on membership, two have been dismissed, a third is seeking dismissal and a fourth is actively in discernment.

6. First, Houston, Texas, in discernment
10. Menlo Park, Calif., seeking dismissal
14. First, Colorado Springs, Colo., dismissed to ECO
15. First, Orlando, Fla., dismissed to EPC.

## Drilling down a little further into the list:

16. First, Greenville, S.C., dismissed to ECO
39. Eastminster, Wichita, Kan., dismissed to EPC
60. Danville Community, Calif., dismissed to EPC
74. First, Edmond, Okla., dismissed to ECO
82. Chapel Hill in Gig Harbor, Wash. dismissed to EPC
85. First, Kingwood, Texas, seeking dismissal

## Dollars and sense

Financially speaking the outlook for the Presbyterian Church (USA) is not nearly as bleak as you might think. At the national level, the Presbyterian Mission Agency (formerly the GAMC) has a very healthy guaranteed income stream from The Presbyterian Foundation. The Office of the General Assembly and middle governing bodies are the ones who find themselves at the pinch point as membership declines because they rely upon on the collection of per capita.

As membership declines so does the number of people over whom per capita can be spread and thus, per capita apportionments must necessarily rise. The offset for presbyteries comes from the sale of real estate at the closure of dying congregations or through the confiscation of the property of those who desire to be aligned with another denominational body. Every time a presbytery closes a church or forces a departing congregation to leave without its property, the presbytery benefits financially. When property is sold or assets liquidated the presbytery has capital to operate.

For how long? That indeed is the question.

| # of members per congregation | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 |
|-------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Median                        | 117  | 115  | 111  | 109  | 107  | 105  | 103  | 100  | 97   | 95   | 93   | 90   | 88   | 85   | 83   | 81   |
| Mean                          | 226  | 221  | 217  | 214  | 212  | 208  | 204  | 199  | 195  | 191  | 187  | 183  | 179  | 175  | 171  | 167  |

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## Analysis: ECO/FOP

# Three sneezes (and a gesundheit)

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see the FOP as an exit ramp designed to facilitate their eventual departure from the PCUSA. A fourth group of churches very much want to be in the Fellowship but because of the toxicity of their presbyteries, movement to align with the FOP in any formal way is blocked.

The language of gracious indifference toward the PCUSA, which was originally heard at FOP gatherings has now become “gracious differentiation.” These Presbyterians intend to be fully differentiated from the PCUSA while remaining within it. Do not expect them to engage in the politics of the denomination and do not expect them to react when the denomination makes ever-more culturally accommodating decisions. Expect them to focus on developing flourishing congregations, forging relationships with each other in mission affinity and peer review groups, fostering their own next generation leadership, and re-investing themselves in the historic confessions of the Reformed faith as a means through which to sharpen the edge of faithful witness.

### A very taut umbrella

The FOP and ECO have held collaborative meetings up to this point. They have also shared a web presence and considerable overlap in leadership. However, the overarching umbrella that is ECO/FOP is now pulled pretty tight. The context of ECO as it grows and develops is very distinct from the context of the FOP. ECO is developing in a post-modern cultural context that is largely post-denominational. The FOP is developing in the context of the PCUSA. As ECO and the FOP each develop necessary structures and practices within their unique contexts, predictable tension is felt as the umbrella is stretched in new ways.

### Gesundheit

Although sneezes often come in threes, a fourth image also seems apropos – orange barrels. Orange barrels are ubiquitous whenever highways are under construction. They signal inconvenience and delay in the present, but they also bear out the promise of a better hoped for future. We endure the mess now for the delayed gratification promised ahead.



There are currently lots of orange barrels that signal that both ECO and the FOP are under construction and still very much “works in progress.” A messy situation should surprise no one.

For those churches in FOP’s majority (those remaining in the PCUSA), a whole set of difficult questions and caution signs present themselves.

The first sign reads, “Warning: Pastoral Succession Ahead.” How are

FOP Pastor Nominating Committees going to juggle the competing demands of congregations with strong evangelical conviction and presbytery Committees on Ministry that are ever-more hostile to those ideals?

A second sign reads “Warning: Misleading Membership Ahead.” How will FOP churches honestly explain the nature of the PCUSA and the church’s continued membership in it to potential new members without risking “misleading advertising” through significant omissions?

A third sign warns of “Risk of Breakdown Ahead.” How will those same churches keep internal cohesion and avoid the gradual defection of their evangelical membership and lay leadership when those churches fail to react meaningfully to future PCUSA actions that may stray even more radically from the “faith once delivered?”

There are no easy answers here, given the factual and legal realities that some FOP churches face. These are warning signs along the route amidst the orange barrels that dot the path toward the future. They are also questions that FOP leadership can expect to wrestle with in the months and years to come.

### Looking ahead down the road

Another collaborative gathering of ECO and the FOP is scheduled for August 2014. That will give each entity 18 months to grow and develop in their respective contexts. Watch for them to differentiate themselves online with distinct web sites which will likely contain much of the same information branded for each.

They will also develop mission affinity groups, peer review models, cooperative leadership development, church planting strategies and engage in theological reflection of the essentials through Doorways. ([www.fellowship-pres.org/study-guides/](http://www.fellowship-pres.org/study-guides/))

# A 'bolder' Susan Mattingly becomes new member of PLC Board of Directors

**By Nathan Key**  
The Layman

Susan Mattingly says faith in God's plan for her life has made her a bolder person, and that bolder Susan Mattingly is pushing for a return to ecclesiastical discipline within the Presbyterian Church (USA).

The resident of Grosse Pointe Woods, Mich., and a new member of the Presbyterian Lay Committee's Board of Directors is hopeful that she can help guide in that direction by serving through the PLC.

"I don't think we gain people for Christ by simply telling them they are wrong," Mattingly said. "We need to be ambassadors in the world, taking the love of Christ to people, helping them grow in their faith and discipleship. I think the Presbyterian Lay Committee can be an important part of that by providing dialogue and keeping that dialogue going."

Mattingly said the PLC was a valuable resource for her church, Grosse Pointe Woods Presbyterian, when it was going through a period of discernment. Mattingly heard PLC President Carmen Fowler LaBerge speak to the congregation she serves as an elder, and the message delivered was about being an asset.

Mattingly prayed about the matter at hand and was led to accept a position with the PLC board.

"In working through that (discernment period), I became much more aware of the national level of politics in the PCUSA," Mattingly said. "I was very concerned with people like myself – lay people – who came in to serve on a committee and may not understand the faith at a level beyond just serving the committee. They may not understand the politics of the denomination."

"I don't have a lot of fancy degrees, but I do understand if you are an elder and a church is in discernment, there has to be a foundation to defend its faith. I'd like to be that for others, the way the Presbyterian Lay Committee was for me and our congregation."

Mattingly said faith in God's plan for her life is what she uses as her guide to overcome any difficult situation.

"The most important thing is my faith in God's plan, for me and the rest of God's children on the planet," she said. "That frees me up from a lot of worry and lets me live with things that may not be comfortable, and allows me to talk with people not



Susan Mattingly

## Board profile

like me. He's allowed me to be a bolder person. My faith lets me know when I need Him, He's there. If God calls me to do something, He will equip me to do it. If I feel silly or unprepared to do something, I leave it at the feet of Jesus. God's grace will cover me."

That new-found boldness allows Mattingly to stand firm in what she wants to see from the PCUSA.

"I think the PCUSA needs to get back to a time of fair representation with ecclesiastical discipline," she said. "While we are still a denomination afraid to offend or uphold what we believe, I think we will remain in battle, conflicted and fragmented. I'd like to see our denomination turn back to God and get back to Scripture. I don't think we have to condone every lifestyle and belief. Jesus does call us to a transformed life, and I'd like to see the denomination get back to that."

Mattingly is a middle school teacher at Pierce Middle School with the Grosse Pointe School District just outside of Detroit where she lives with her husband Ray, a professor of pharmacology (cancer research) at Wayne State University, and sons George, 19, and Raymond, 16.

She works with special needs students at Pierce, primarily those with autism. She had been an aide but started tutoring students in math. She determined she could teach math, so she returned to school and earned her certification in math and political science, embarking on a new path.

"What I most like are the 'ah-ha' moments when a student gets it," Mattingly said of the joy she gets from teaching. "That shows when they understand a concept or complete a task they have been struggling with for a while. It doesn't matter what the moment is. You see them struggle with it, and they use their creative minds to grasp it. That's when they show that independence and creative thought."

Originally from Pittsburgh, Pa., Mattingly earned a degree in French Language and Literature from the University of Virginia in Charlottesville where she met her husband. They lived in Burlington, Vt., before moving back to Charlottesville and eventually settling in Grosse Pointe Woods.

## Presbyterian Lay Committee

### *Raising The Standard Since 1965*

Presbyterian Lay Committee  
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## Mission Statement

The mission of the Presbyterian Lay Committee is to inform and equip Christians to share the Biblical faith by proclaiming Jesus Christ alone as:

- The Way of salvation.
- The Truth of God's Word.
- The Life of discipleship.

## Objectives

1. To provide reliable information and resources concerning significant issues confronting the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Church Universal, thereby equipping and empowering faithful congregations and leaders in the PCUSA and other denominations to fulfill the Great Commission in the 21st century.
2. To inform and equip congregations and leaders in the PCUSA and other denominations concerning the urgency for greater emphasis on the teaching of the Bible as the authoritative Word of God and regular Bible study and prayer.
3. To inform and equip congregations and leaders in the PCUSA and other denominations concerning the urgency of presenting Jesus Christ as the Lord and Savior through preaching, teaching and witnessing, with evangelical zeal, as the primary mission of the Church.
4. To inform and equip individual Christians in the PCUSA and other denominations to engage the ethical and moral issues in cultural, economic and political affairs as Christ's active disciples.

The PLC is a member – and affirms the respective statements on mission, ethics and accountability – of the Evangelical Council on Financial Accountability and the Evangelical Press Association. It also is a member of the Presbyterian Renewal Network and the Association for Church Renewal.

## Moderator's Peace Summit

# Table is set almost exclusively to one side

The Moderator of the 220th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Rev. Dr. Neal Presa, has posted a report of his activities for the first six months of his two-year term. In addition to his travelogue, the report describes the groundwork the moderator has been laying for a "Unity with Difference" Gathering.

Immediately following the General Assembly meeting in Pittsburgh, Presa, Vice Moderator Tom Trinidad and former GA Moderator Rick Ufford-Chase, who now heads the Stony Point Conference Center, issued an invitation to six organizations who were each in turn to designate two leaders to send to the event.

The invitation described the purpose of the event:

*"To engage in a dialogue process between/ among the leadership of the renewal and progressive affinity groups of the Presbyterian Church (USA) towards constructing a common language of being Christ's community called the Presbyterian Church (USA). The process envisions a mutual 'peace accord' that can be offered to the whole denomination as a means of living into and dignifying difference within the lordship of the triune God, as embodied in the sacramental unity of baptism."*

That event took place at Stony Point in New York in early December. Although the moderator's report says that "leaders of six organizations met," his pastoral letter to the church lists seven.

1. Covenant Network of Presbyterians
2. Fellowship of Presbyterians (FOP)
3. More Light Presbyterians
4. NEXT Church
5. Presbyterians Voices for Justice (formerly The Witherspoon Society and Voices of Sophia)
6. Presbyterian Welcome
7. That All May Freely Serve

Although the FOP is comprised of churches largely identifiable as formerly engaged in denominational renewal, the FOP is expressly not a renewal organization. The other six organizations are easily identifiable as progressive. Five of them are expressly pro-LGBT and are working to redefine marriage.

No group associated with The Presbyterian Renewal Network participated in the event. One struggles to imagine the value of fruit produced at a table set almost exclusively to one side.

### Why was the table so lopsided?

The Layman has learned that two other "renewal" minded groups were invited to send representatives to Stony Point.

The board of directors of both Presbyterians for Renewal (PFR) and the Presbyterian Coalition declined. Why?

The Rev. Mary Holder Naegeli, moderator of the Coalition, wrote that "When the initial invitation was issued, PFR and Coalition representatives asked Presa to invite One By One also, which he did. Over the course of several weeks we asked Presa for specific goals and expected outcomes for the meeting. The answers given did not resonate with our calling, so we ultimately declined to attend."

Three reasons renewal groups didn't participate:

First, there is nothing on which to compromise when it comes to the convictions of those represented on both sides of the theological divide in the PCUSA.

Second, a shift has occurred among organizations historically focused on the institutional renewal of the PCUSA. They are almost all now focused on personal and congregational renewal, seeking to foster healthy congregations that advance the Kingdom of God without investing further in the denomination.

Third, these groups and their leaders have plenty of past experience with bilateral talks orchestrated by denominational officials.

By my count, there have been at least four such public efforts.\*

- In 1996 and 1997 it was the search for "common ground."
- In 1998 it was the "Call to Sabbatical."
- In 1999 it was the quest for "Unity in Diversity."
- In 2000 it was the search for "third way language."

### Past to present

Over the past decade it was the Peace, Unity and Purity Task Force and the related report and

another call to sabbatical.

Now the language we're hearing is that of "mutual forbearance." Much like the call to sabbatical, mutual forbearance suggests that everyone agree to allow everyone to do whatever is right in their own eyes.

If conservatives

do not press for discipline or accountability to the mutually agreed upon constitutional standards related to marriage then progressives won't push for mandating the ordination of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) persons.

None of this addresses the core concern:

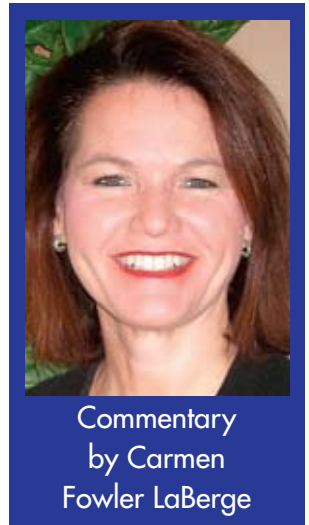
Where there is no fundamental agreement on the essentials of the faith and the nature of faithfulness and where there is no agreement on the nature of holiness in response to the authority of God's Word and Spirit in the life of a disciple, there is no unity of the Spirit and therefore, no bond of peace. Yes we all share a baptism,

but our understanding of Christ's Lordship could not be more different.

The hesitancy of evangelicals in the PCUSA to attend an orchestrated conversation that is advertised in advance as intending to result in "a peace accord" is not surprising when one understands the litany of attempts to have evangelicals compromise away their convictions in accommodation of others who continue to seek to push the PCUSA further away from the essentials that once bound us together as one visible expression of the Church.

The good news is that Christ is not divided and the Church is One because He is One. His is a unity not so much sought as received, by the power of the Holy Spirit who is the bond of peace.

*\* For more information on the public efforts, see the online version of Carmen's article at [www.layman.org](http://www.layman.org) or read Broken Covenant by Parker T. Williamson. It can be purchased at [www.layman.org/bookstore2](http://www.layman.org/bookstore2)*



Commentary  
by Carmen  
Fowler LaBerge

Where there is no fundamental agreement on the essentials of the faith and the nature of faithfulness and where there is no agreement on the nature of holiness in response to the authority of God's Word and Spirit in the life of a disciple, there is no unity of the Spirit and therefore, no bond of peace.

# EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

## A journey through II Peter and Jude

Let's go on a journey together.

The components of a journey (trip, excursion, voyage, jaunt) are familiar to us all. We have a desire to get away from the routine of daily living and see new and exciting places. We think through the cost of money and time because taking off on a trip is never easy or cheap.

We plan the details because there is something about the unknown that always scares us, so we try to project ourselves into the daily, even hourly, component of the excursion to answer eventual questions like, "What are we doing Tuesday morning?"

Then, with those going on the trip with us, we share the hopes and wishes for a *bon voyage*. The joy of the journey is multiplied as others share in the same vision of going to another land and culture. We complete our packing, and we are off on our adventure. The journey of this book has some of the same components, even though we may not leave our hometown.

The desire for this journey through the Bible is to break out of a daily routine of not living for God as we ought and not knowing that Scripture is where we get to know God and ourselves. Basically, it is a desire for God:

*As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God (Psalm 42:1).*

The cost of this journey is time and effort. The precious commodity of time might be dearer to some of us than money. However, there is another cost for this trip through the Word of God. It demands discipline. It calls for focus. It is work.

*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth (II Timothy 2:15).*

The plan for this journey is a systematic, book-by-book jaunt through the entire Bible. Over 52 weeks, Genesis through Revelation will be covered by means of teaching, reading, memorizing, praying, applying and sharing the unique contribution of every section of Scripture. Assignments will be given every week encouraging a daily focus on each portion of the Bible. This makes *The Journey* a year-long excursion into meditating upon the Word of God.

*Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long (Psalm 119:97).*

This journey is worth sharing. It is not meant to be done alone or experienced alone. It is not designed to be a one-time expedition that is just to be endured and forgotten. The truths taught and the lessons learned, therefore, are meant to go beyond the individual student and the isolated classroom.

There is a dynamic to the study of Scripture that transforms the individual so that others also might be transformed. The experience of the Early Church is supposed to be ours:

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ... And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:42, 47).*

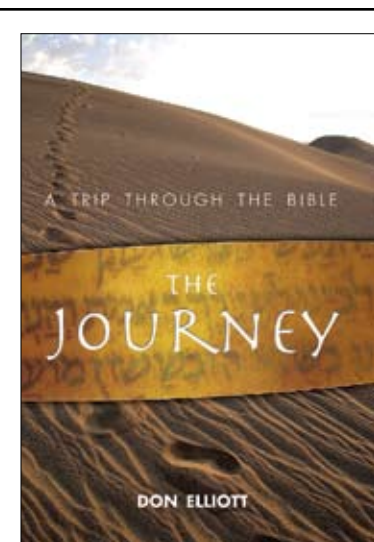
The joy of this journey will provide the ultimate assessment of its value. Knowledge of Biblical facts is not the goal here. Being able to simply quote the Bible or tell someone that we have read the whole Bible is not what we are going for. The pure exercising of a discipline, even though that is commendable, is not the target. It is to experience the joy of knowing God and living for Him.

The etymology of the word "journey" is interesting. It comes from the French word *journee*, which means "a day's work or travel."

The combination of the length of a day and the expression of work as the original definition of a journey helps us to see how we are to proceed on this journey through the Bible. It will not be accomplished in one day, but will call for an almost daily effort. It will take a year to complete the journey, and it will call for a special effort and focus. Truly, a journey of a thousand miles starts, and continues, with one step.

Basically, *The Journey* is a Bible survey. There are some particular convictions that will govern the study of the books of the Bible and the lessons drawn from them. These convictions are drawn from the Reformed tradition, where Biblical truth, theological integrity and practical living converge into a life lived with joy for the glory of God. Each conviction is important to our understanding of the nature of the Word of God, its impact on our lives, and how the Biblical world and our personal worlds are connected by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Along with Scripture, the Westminster Confession is quoted to accentuate the Biblical and theological roots of each conviction.



### The Journey

The Jan./Feb. equipping section is based on *The Journey*, written by the Rev. Don Elliott and published by PLC Publications.

The staff of the Presbyterian Lay Committee has been using *The Journey* to supplement its Bible study each morning.

The book can be purchased through The Layman Online's bookstore ([www.layman.org/bookstore2](http://www.layman.org/bookstore2)) or through Amazon.com.

*Don Elliott has been pastor at First Presbyterian Church, Corinth, Miss., since August, 1985. He and his wife, Lynn, have three grown sons. He has a B.A. from Belhaven College, Jackson, Miss.; a M. Div., from Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Miss.; and a D. Min., from Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, Calif. Elliott has served in previous pastorates in Monroeville, Ala., and Menlo, Ga.*

# EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

## Week One

II Peter and Jude share the same message. As a matter of fact, there is a scholarly debate about whether Jude had II Peter in front of him when he wrote, or whether Peter had Jude in front of him when he wrote. They are that similar. These two books have a dual purpose:

1. **To be aware of apostates** – those who had left the true faith and were teaching false doctrine and were still in the Church

*But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. (II Peter 2:1)*

*For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. (Jude 4)*

2. **To call to apologetics** – this is not “apologizing” for the faith, but defending the faith

*Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. (Jude 3)*

Since both II Peter and Jude confront the issue of false teachers in the Church, the walk through these epistles will be done by pointing out the truths highlighted about false teachers. The characteristics of false teachers will be listed, along with the antidote to be applied to confront false teachers.

### Lessons to be learned from II Peter and Jude

There will be opposition to the truth. The existence of false teachers has been a constant in the history of the Church. It never should come as a surprise that there are those who twist and tear the truth of God for their own advantage and pleasure.

There always is a need to stand for the truth. The godly call in the face of false teachings is to stand and be faithful. The temptation is to overlook the false teachings or to run from them. Contending for the faith is a call for the Christian.

### Theme verse

*Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. (Jude 3)*

### Questions for reflection:

1. Do you experience opposition to the truth of God’s Word in the church today? Where? How? From whom?
2. How do you respond to that opposition?
3. Who is teaching the truth of God’s Word and how are you sitting under their instruction?

## Characteristics of false teachers

### Week Two

**Reality:** False teachers are more interested in personal gain than telling the truth.

*But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep. (II Peter 2:1-3)*

**Antidote:** The way to fight false teachers is with the truth of Scripture:

*Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (II Peter 1:20-21)*

Jude puts the same truth this way:

*“Contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).*

The “faith” Jude refers to is not the verb “to believe,” but the noun referring to a body of truth or, specifically, the Biblical apostolic faith. The first line of attack against false teachings in the Church is for us to be Biblical. Preach the Word. Teach the Word. Proclaim the truth.

**Reality:** False teachers are interested in getting more than in giving.

*These are hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves; waterless clouds, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted; (Jude 12)*

*These are grumblers, malcontents, following their own sinful desires; they are loud-mouthed boasters, showing favoritism to gain advantage. (Jude 16)*

**Antidote:** We are to give ourselves to God. The most important thing to do in the light of false teachers getting money, power, influence and attention in the Church is for us to give ourselves to God.

*For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. (II Peter 1:5-7)*

### Questions for reflection:

1. Are you able to distinguish truth from error when you hear it from the pulpit, the lectern or in the classroom?
2. When you recognize error in teaching how do you respond? How might you respond?
3. How might you become more Biblically literate in order to be better prepared to both recognize and respond to false teaching in the church?

### Week Three

**Reality:** False teachers’ personal lives are marked by immorality.

*... They count it pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, while they feast with you. They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children! (II Peter 2:13-14)*  
*For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. (Jude 4)*

**Antidote:** Let them follow their sinful desires. Let us be sure we do not. We are called to holiness and righteousness.

*But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. (II Peter 3:18)*

*But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, (Jude 20)*

**Reality:** False teachers lead people away from God, rather than closer to God. They are blasphemous – anti-God.

*Bold and willful, they do not tremble as they blaspheme the glorious ones, whereas angels, though greater in might and power, do not pronounce a blasphemous judgment against them before the Lord. But these, like irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and destroyed, blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant (II Peter 2:10-12)*

**Antidote:** Jude 21: “Keep yourselves in God’s love.”

*Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (II Peter 1:10-11)*

### Questions for reflection:

1. What distinguishes a life that is marked by immorality from a life of righteousness?
2. What measure do you use to determine whether or not a thought, word or deed is moral or immoral?
3. What experiences do you have with false teachers who have lead people away from God?
4. What does it mean to “practice the qualities” of our calling and election?

## Week Four

So, what is to be done as believers in the light of false teachers? Generally, it is a call to be faithful and persevere (II Peter 1:3, 4). Specifically, Jude gives three commands in Jude 17-23: remember, remain and reach out.

### Remember:

*But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. They said to you, “In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions.” It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit. (Jude 17-19)*

- Remember the truth of Scripture.
- Remember the prophecies of Scripture that recall the truth that false teachers always have been with God’s people and always will be with God’s people. It even will intensify in the last days.
- Remember the unity of the Church. Do not let them divide the Church.
- Remember who have the Spirit of God.

### Remain

*But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life (Jude 20-21).*

- Build yourselves up in your most holy faith; grow and mature.
- Pray in the Holy Spirit, which is a reference to true prayer. Do not just utter words toward the ceiling. Really communicate with God as the Spirit leads in one’s prayer life.
- Keep yourselves in God’s love. God’s love should be the truth one clings to no matter what else happens.
- Waiting for God to take us to

heaven and to judge the false teachers (Jude 14, 15 and II Peter 3:4-9).

### Reach out

*And have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh. (Jude 22-23)*

The three imperatives in this passage are have mercy, save, and show mercy. Each is directed toward a different group of people.

- Have mercy on those who are victims of false teaching. Many in the church come by their heretical beliefs honestly. They have been taught untruth by false teachers.
- Some are open to yet being saved. We are called to evangelize them with the saving truth of the Gospel. Yes, there is a place for evangelism in the church because there are those who are unconverted.
- Finally, we must guard against callousness. It is very easy to be so upset with unBiblical behavior that one loses sight of the need to show mercy to those who are genuinely blinded, deceived and lost. Hate the sin, but deeply and compassionately love the sinner.

### Questions for reflection:

1. Reflect on the reality that “You cannot remember that which you do not know.” Ask yourself, “How well do I know God? How well do I know God’s will? How thoroughly do I know God’s Word?”
2. Read John 15 and consider what it means to remain or abide in God’s love.
3. What does it mean to be called to evangelize the church? (For further study: read Darrell Guder’s *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*)



Book review:

# Jesus and the Jewish festivals

Review by **Kenneth E. Bailey**  
Special to The Layman

What if Luke had accompanied Thomas in his missionary journeys to the East rather than follow Paul in his travels to the West?

Had that happened Aramaic and Syriac culture and language would be the basis of our understanding of the Christian faith. We would have instinctively understood our need to look at the text of the Gospels through Middle Eastern culture in order to penetrate the deeper levels of the person and teachings of Jesus. But that is not what happened.

For centuries we in the West have studied the Gospels in the light of the Latin and Greek worlds and have assumed that by the time of Jesus, 300 years of Hellenism in the Middle East guaranteed that there is little serious need for us to peek over the cultural wall into the Jewish, Semitic world of Jesus.

Thus it is with delight that I read Dr. Gary Burge's new book *Jesus and the Jewish Festivals*. What everyone understands, no one seeks to explain. The authors of the Gospels assume a readership that understands the Jewish festivals and thereby never elucidate them or comment on their importance.

This book includes 101 attractive, full-color pictures and five very helpful diagrams. Burge's style is clear and engaging. The work is not burdened with ponderous footnotes, and his lucid prose is mercifully free of the cobwebs of academia.

The seven chapters cover a general introduction to the "festivals of Judaism" and go on to present:

- Jesus and the Sabbath (John 5),
- The Passover (John 6),
- The Tabernacles (John 7-9),
- Hanukkah (John 10),
- His Final Passover (John 13-19), and
- Conclude with reflection on "The Early Christians and the Jewish Festivals."

Burge astutely observes that we in the West "have failed to recognize the gulf that exists between who we are today and the context of the Bible. We have forgotten that we read the Bible as foreigners, as visitors who have traveled not only to a new geography but a new century. We are literary tourists who are deeply in need of a guide" (p 11).

As Burge makes clear, the festivals relate to the agricultural year and at the same time connect with Israel's sacred history.

The Passover celebrates the "early harvest" while commemorating the "escape from Egypt."

Pentecost remembers the "end harvest" and recalls the "arrival at Mt. Sinai and the covenant and law."

The Feast of Tabernacles has to do with the harvest of fruits and vines and also points to the "wilderness wanderings" with its desert shelters. So the pious Jew who builds and sleeps in a "booth" for a few nights in the fall is both celebrating the end of the yearly harvest when shelters must be built in the fields to protect the crop from thieves, and also brings to remembrance a people on the move in the wilderness on their way to the promised land.

Burge is the author of a study of *The Holy Spirit in the Johannine Tradition* (Eerdmans: 1987) a *Guide to Interpreting the Gospel of John* (Baker:1992) and a fine commentary on the Gospel of John (Zondervan: 2000). This background gives special depth to his observations on how an understanding of the Jewish festivals enriches our understanding of numerous passages in John's Gospel.

I know of no work that so clearly summarizes and clarifies the importance of understanding the Jewish festivals as a background for interpreting the Gospels (particularly in the Gospel of John). I highly recommend it to all.

*Kenneth E. Bailey, Th. D., is the professor of New Testament at the Ecumenical Institute (Emeritus) and author and lecturer in Middle Eastern New Testament Studies. He resides in New Wilmington, Pa.*



**Gary M. Burge, Jesus and the Jewish Festivals (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012) softcover \$14.99, e-book \$6.99**

**Other Bailey book reviews of the Ancient Context, Ancient Faith series posted on The Layman Online include:**

- **Jesus the Middle Eastern Storyteller**  
[www.layman.org/news.aspx?article=31034](http://www.layman.org/news.aspx?article=31034)
- **Encounters with Jesus**  
[www.layman.org/news.aspx?article=31089](http://www.layman.org/news.aspx?article=31089)

# Congressman seeks position to help persecuted Christians

By **Nathan Key**  
The Layman

A United States congressman is trying to create a special envoy position within the State Department to advocate on behalf of religious minorities in the Middle East as well as South Central Asia.

Frank Wolf, a Republican member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Virginia's 10th district, introduced bipartisan legislation, along with Democrat Anna G. Eshoo of California, to create the position. Serving his 17th term in the House, Wolf has been one of Congress' most outspoken leaders on religious freedom and human rights.

"We need to have an advocate for Christians and other minorities in the Middle East," Wolf said. "The way things are going I really see in a few years there will be few, if any, Christians left in the Middle East."

"We have a strategic and moral imperative to protect and preserve these ancient faith communities, which this administration has failed to do," Wolf said. "Too often, we in the West have turned a blind eye to the suffering of persecuted people of faith. Having a single, high-level person within the State Department bureaucracy charged with this pivotal task will send an important message to both our own foreign policy establishment and to suffering communities in the Middle East and elsewhere that religious freedom is a priority – that America will be a voice for the voiceless."

"I urge that every Presbyterian pastor who wants to follow God's Word will speak out, or we may see our Christian communities emptied in the Middle East."

Wolf penned a letter to more than 300 Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox leaders in the western world recently. In it, he asked them to use their influence to speak out on behalf of persecuted Christians around the world.

"I hope the church in the western world thinks this is an important issue and will speak out," said Wolf. "We need the government of the United States to be an advocate for people of faith who are being persecuted like we used to be. More and more Christians around the world are being persecuted, and their numbers have been diminishing the last several years."

# Connecting the unreached with Christ

By Nathan Key  
The Layman

ORLANDO, Fla. – Sharing Jesus Christ with the rest of the world is the goal of the Presbyterian Frontier Fellowship (PFF). It accomplishes its mission by inviting believers to engage in taking the good news of Jesus and His kingdom to people groups where He is not yet known.

Tara Chase, associate director of PFF, shared what the ministry does and how it functions during a session called “Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Jesus” at the National Gathering of The Fellowship of Presbyterians (FOP) and ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians held Jan. 30-Feb. 1 in Orlando, Fla.

Chase, who has visited many countries and peoples that have no knowledge of Christ, said the purpose is to share God’s kingdom, though there are times when the Gospel is not shared, not because of lack of trying but rather a lack of interest on the part of the unreached people.

“We want them to see what God is doing,” she said. “I do get a lot of closed doors when I start speaking the Christian language. When I say I’m a Christian, I mean I love Jesus Christ and want to follow Him. But a Muslim in China hears that and thinks of Christians as materialistic and disingenuous.”

Chase shared statistics that show there are nearly 16,600 people groups in the world, and nearly 7,200 of them are unreached by the Word of God. Most of those unreached people can be found in northern Africa, the Middle East, India and China – places where Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu faiths are prevalent.

“We’re concerned with making sure this population gets a chance to know who Jesus is and follow Him,” Chase mentioned.

Chase gave examples of the ministry’s outreach in some of the world’s unreached regions, from a Tibetan monk learning about Jesus through a Mexican missionary to a business formed in Katmandu, Nepal, that shares the Word with people as they are trained in basic computer skills.

She also told how a Tibetan woman was touched by a visit from Christians who gave her a necklace as a gift for her hospitality shown to them.

“She was touched, sobbing and asking, ‘Who am I to receive this?’” Chase said. “We can ask that of God ourselves. ‘Who am I that You would come so far and give so much to say I see you and love you?’ God is touching people’s lives.”

One final story told of a Chinese grandmother from the Hui people group with poor eye sight.

The team that visited with her prayed a simple prayer of, “Dear God, please heal Nai Nai, in Jesus’ name,” over and over. After not being able to see, the woman finally opened her eyes and exclaimed in Arabic, “Praise God, I can see!” That changed her beliefs and led her grandchildren to follow Jesus.

“This is happening all over the world,” Chase said. “God is showing His love in such a tangible way. He is active in the world today to make His name known.”

Jesus said in Matthew 24-14, “And this Gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”

“Reaching the unreached is God’s plan, and we have a part to play,” Chase said. “We are the salt of the earth, the light of the world, ministers of reconciliation. Our commission, as Jesus said (in Matthew 28:19) is to go and make disciples of all nations.”

Chase offered four steps to help with fulfillment of that commission: Worship, pray, give and go.

“Ask God, ‘What part do You want me to play that those who do not know You will choose You,’” Chase said. “The good news is His kingdom is coming, and it’s exciting.”

## Persecution of Christians continues around the globe

By Nathan Key  
The Layman

Never has the persecution of Christians been more evident than in the 2013 release of the Open Doors World Watch list. ([www.worldwatchlist.us/](http://www.worldwatchlist.us/))

That recent report by Open Doors, an organization serving persecuted Christians around the world, reveals that Christians from countries on the African continent are now among those facing the most severe persecution for their faith, whether through private, family, community, national or church means.

Jerry Dykstra, media director for Open Doors, said the organization has been working with the persecuted church for nearly 60 years, seeking to raise awareness of the plight facing Christians and their faith in other countries.

“Persecution, obviously, is still prevalent,” Dykstra said. “We believe all doors are still open, and we encourage Christians, wherever they are,



**2013 World Watch List Map** ([www.opendoorsusa.org](http://www.opendoorsusa.org)) The darker the color on the map, the more extreme the persecution.

to remain true to their faith.”

Interrogation, arrest and even death await Christians exhibiting their faith in more than 60 countries around the globe, much like it did more than 20 centuries ago.

Of the top 20 countries where Christians face persecution for their faith, seven of them can be found in Africa. A total of 14 African countries are on the list of nations

with the highest rates of Christian persecution, more than a quarter of those listed in the top 50.

Mali made the list after not being ranked a year ago and checked in at No. 7 in the recent ranking.

Somalia is rated fifth, and the small country of Eritrea is ranked 10th, with Sudan (12) Nigeria (13), Ethiopia (15) and Libya (17) also among the top 20.

North Korea once again was the top-ranked country as far as Christian persecution is concerned, a dubious distinction held by the Com-

unist country for 11 straight years. Merely possessing a Bible can be reason enough for a Christian to be executed or sent to a prison camp in North Korea along with three generations of his/her family.

Other nations in the top 10 were Saudi Arabia (2), Afghanistan (3), Iraq (4), Maldives (6), Iran (8) and Yemen (9). Extreme Islam poses the greatest threat to Christians in those countries.

Syria made the biggest jump on the list, rising from No. 36 last year to No. 11 in the 2013 release. Many Christians have fled the country after their freedom to worship was threatened by those with anti-Christian agendas.

Dykstra said the western church needs to pray for those being persecuted for their faith around the globe.

“A lot of people in the west don’t realize how much the word ‘persecution’ is mentioned in the Bible,” he said. “It tells us clearly that we will be persecuted for our faith. Christians are suffering. It’s not going to be easy, but we have to give those being persecuted our support. We have to come alongside our brothers and sisters in Christ.”

# Commission formed to work with disaffiliated churches

By Nathan Key  
The Layman

During a special called meeting, the Maumee Valley Presbytery in Findlay, Ohio, formed an Administrative Commission to work with a pair of churches that have disaffiliated from the Presbyterian Church (USA).

First Presbyterian Church of Ada, located between Dayton and Toledo, and First Presbyterian Church of Bucyrus, found between Columbus and Toledo, have disaffiliated from the PCUSA but did not go through the presbytery's dismissal procedures to do so.

The six-member Administrative Commission was formed Jan. 22 to work with both churches.

Dean McGormley, stated clerk for Maumee Valley Presbytery, acknowledged the presbytery had been notified by both churches that they had left the PCUSA and are part of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC).

"They are still a church in the PCUSA until such time the presbytery dismisses them, but it appears both have abandoned ship, though the ship still sails," McGormley said. "The pastors and a good portion of the congregations have left, but the churches have not left. They are still entities and have not been dismissed or dissolved by the PCUSA."

At a meeting between three members of the presbytery and the session and pastor of First Presbyterian of Ada in late November, the membership of the church was encouraged to participate in the Maumee Valley Presbytery separation process in place for churches with a desire to leave the PCUSA.

The Ada church representatives informed the three-member team, including McGormley, that the membership had voted to leave, had left and no longer was under the PCUSA's authority and would not participate in the separation policy.

Ada Pastor Patrick Allen said the congregation voted 53-0 by written ballot in mid-October 2012 to leave the PCUSA and affiliate with the EPC. The next week, the church informed the presbytery of its decision.

"Hundreds of other congregations are doing this right now," he said, citing the "New Form of Government" in the *Book of Order* as the primary reason for disaffiliating with the PCUSA. "The culture and theology really concerned us. In our minds, it changed the denomination."

**"I have confidence in the people on the commission... We hope they discover our path to be a valid one even if it is not the one preferred. We hope they recognize that we have left and are now part of the EPC."**

**Pastor Patrick Allen**

tion's function will be to determine if any members of the Ada church want to remain with the PCUSA.

Allen said the route taken by his congregation is not the one preferred by the presbytery, but it is one the church felt was needed.

"We're hopeful there won't be any issues, and we're hoping for a peaceful resolution, working to avoid any big fight over property," he said. "We still can arrive at the same place, just by different paths."

Allen explained Ada opted to disaffiliate rather than seek dismissal because of issues other churches had in leaving the PCUSA.

"We heard the policy was broken and not working," Allen said. "We didn't feel it wise to enter a policy so many felt broken. We didn't think that would be the best way for our church to arrive at its goal. We'll have to see how the commission reacts. I have confidence in the people on the commission; they're good people. We hope they discover our path to be a valid one even if it is not the one preferred. We hope they recognize that we have left and are now part of the EPC."

First Presbyterian Church of Bucyrus sent a letter in mid-October 2012 signed individually by 11 members of its session, noting the congregation had voted to end its affiliation with the PCUSA. A letter from the church a month later indicated Bucyrus had withdrawn from the PCUSA and Maumee Valley Presbytery.

Pastor John Cory said members of his congregation of about 140 approached him within months of his call to the church and spoke of their disenchantment with the direction the PCUSA was heading. He sought resources for

"Sometimes you have to step out on faith into a new future. Our congregation is united on this decision, and we look forward to a new direction for our church."

Allen said his understanding is that the Administrative Commis-

congregants and, eventually, it became clear a move needed to be made.

"There was momentum to move forward; we had to decide to remain or separate ourselves from the PCUSA," he said.

Cory said there was a feeling that the dismissal process did not function as it should. He cited the dismissal process for First Presbyterian Church of Tecumseh in Michigan as an example.

"As we watched that process, it just didn't seem like the presbytery and the Administrative Commission were responding in a Christ-honoring way; it seemed like there was hostility," Cory said.

A diminished level of trust in the dismissal process, which appeared to lack consistency and seemed heavy-handed at times, led Bucyrus to choose disaffiliation from the PCUSA.

"It wasn't a matter of just walking away; we didn't believe we would be safe in the process," Cory said.

Theological differences were at the root of the decision to leave the PCUSA.

"The denomination, as a whole, has made some bad choices that go against the Biblical mandate and what God says," Cory explained. "Ultimately, there are differing viewpoints that caused increasing tension. Some folks adhere to the traditional beliefs, and there are others who explore the fringe of post-modern Christianity. It just doesn't work."

But FPC-Bucyrus, already accepted by the EPC, appears to have found the Reformed denomination that best suits the beliefs of its membership.

"It's the closest fit to who we already were," Cory said. "It's not that we were changing; the (PCUSA) denomination was changing. We were trying to stay the same."

It is Cory's hope that the remainder of his church's time spent working with the Administrative Commission will be amicable.

"I look at this as Christians having a theological disagreement," he said. "Sometimes relationships like this need to be changed, and you have to be with the group you feel most comfortable with. We're not trying to change or convert (the PCUSA); we're merely trying to stay true to what we believe to be true."

"We need to be sharing the good news of Jesus Christ in the most glorifying way possible."

**"Sometimes relationships like this need to be changed, ... We're not trying to change or convert (the PCUSA); we're merely trying to stay true to what we believe to be true."**

**Pastor John Cory**

# Presbytery dismisses church in Edmond, Okla., to ECO

By Nathan Key  
The Layman

One of the most prominent Presbyterian churches in Oklahoma has ended its affiliation with the Presbyterian Church (USA).

First Presbyterian Church of Edmond's request for dismissal from the PCUSA was granted Jan. 28 when Indian Nations Presbytery voted to allow the church to leave and join ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians.

Representatives of the churches in the presbytery voted 63-4 in favor of the dismissal to ECO, another Presbyterian denomination.

In spite of the vote for dismissal, the ordination papers for Senior Pastor Mateen Ellass and two associates have not been transferred to ECO, even though representatives from ECO sent a letter to the presbytery informing the body that it would assume ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Edmond's pastors and congregation.

Elass said until that takes place, he and his associates are still part of the presbytery. "We're waiting to see if we will be transferred," he said.

The presbytery vote came a day after the FPC-Edmond congregation overwhelmingly voted to leave the denomination in one of the church's most significant meetings in its history dating back to formation in 1891.

More than 1,000 people turned out for the

vote, and 870 members of the church cast ballots Jan. 27. Eight-hundred fifteen of them were in favor of leaving the PCUSA. Fifty-five voted against the proposal.

The church needed 685 votes in favor of dismissal for an Administrative Commission of the presbytery to recommend the move from the PCUSA to ECO.

The church has a membership of about 1,400.

Under terms of the dismissal agreement, FPC-Edmond will provide a lump sum payment of \$510,000 to Indian Nations Presbytery but will retain its property rights.

Also, the church had requested that its dismissal date from the PCUSA be listed as Jan. 31 to avoid any health insurance coverage issues for staff members through the Board of Pensions, but the presbytery did not grant that, making the dismissal effective with the results of the Jan. 28 vote.

Despite such issues, Ellass said the church had been able to navigate its way through the dismissal process.

"It hasn't been too difficult," he said. "We've been able to hurdle the barriers the Administrative Commission has erected to slow our departure. What's been disheartening is seeing people who go by the name of Christ treat others with such a coldness, meanness and legalism."

Theological differences and a perception that the church had strayed from the authority of the Scripture played roles in Edmond's decision to seek dismissal.

"The theological difference was the precipitating cause," Ellass said. "During the last decade our church has been very active in the renewal movement of the PCUSA, supporting financially as well as with manpower. We've tried hard to be one participant seeking to put the brakes on the denomination's slide over the years, but we've not had a discernible impact."

The church created a task force that had been examining issues within the PCUSA, and the FPC-Edmond session decided in March 2012 to seek the process of dismissal from the denomination.

That led the congregation to A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians, or ECO.

"ECO, we discerned, had a strong desire for the proclamation of the Gospel and spreading that news to the world," Ellass said. "The goal of this denomination (ECO) is to bring polity into serving the mission. We sought to be affiliated with ECO because it allows churches and encourages churches to get beyond the brick and mortar mentality in how they serve God. We wanted to be part of a denomination that would press us to do things we know are right as a church."

## Two churches dismissed; one enters discernment period

The Layman

The Presbytery of Lehigh dismissed two of its 34 congregations in 2012.

**Middle Smithfield Presbyterian Church** has joined the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) after ending its long affiliation with the Presbyterian Church (USA).

The process of discernment and dismissal for the church in East Stroudsburg, Pa., took more than 18 months and was completed in June 2012 when it was dismissed by the Lehigh Presbytery with the condition of acceptance by the EPC. That was finalized when Middle Smithfield was accepted into the EPC's Presbytery of the East, Pastor Jeff Brower explained.

The terms involved a descending payment of per-capita expenses over a five-year period to total approximately \$17,000 as well as a payment of \$2,500 annually for five years to the PCUSA mission budget. Brower said that annual payment to the mission budget will be made to assist with Camp Brainerd, a local Presbyterian camp located near the church in the Pocono Mountains.

**First Presbyterian Church (FPC)** of Milford also has been dismissed from the PCUSA. Doug Jacobs, an elder with FPC-Milford, said the church of about 200 members located east of Scranton in Pennsylvania near the New York and New Jersey borders has been dismissed to join the EPC.

The Milford session began to research a possible move to the EPC about three years ago to determine if it would be a comfortable and fulfilling move to make.

In the fall of 2011, Milford leaders contacted Lehigh Presbytery about the church's intent to leave the PCUSA for the EPC. The presbytery formed a committee to meet with Milford, and in April 2012 terms of dismissal were negotiated.

In June of last year, the presbytery voted to dismiss Milford subject to its acceptance as part of the EPC, which was granted in September 2012.

Under terms of dismissal, Milford will provide approximately \$16,000 to Lehigh Presbytery as descending payments of per capita over a four-year period and make a contribution of \$1,550 annually for four years to the Presbyterian Mission Budget. Milford also will be allowed to keep its property.

On Jan. 27, the congregation of the **First Presbyterian Church (FPC)** of Houston, Texas, voted 620-271 to enter into the Presbytery of New Covenant's reconciliation and dismissal process.

In a letter to the congregation, the session said, "The meeting is NOT being called in order to vote on whether we should remain affiliated with the PCUSA – but only to determine whether you believe it would be beneficial to go through the discernment process."



# PCUSA lobbyist spearheads new push to tighten gun laws

By Alan F.H. Wisdom  
The Layman

Leading off a Capitol Hill press conference on Jan. 15, the Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson II delivered a faith-based appeal: “Let our love bind us together to challenge the onslaught of gun violence in our nation. Tell Congress and our President to pass legislation that will tighten gun laws in this country. God is love!”

Nelson, director of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Office of Public Witness in Washington, was first in a lineup of religious officials presenting a letter to Congress proclaiming “the call of our faiths to confront America’s gun violence epidemic and to rally support for policies that reduce death and injury from gunfire.” Specifically, the 47 signers of the letter urged:

“Every person who buys a gun should pass a criminal background check.”

“High-capacity weapons and ammunition magazines should not be available to civilians.”

“Gun trafficking should be made a federal crime.”

Besides Nelson, other signers included representatives of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Islamic Society of North America, and liberal Jewish groups. Prominent religious bodies not represented included the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest historically black Baptist denominations, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

The press release announcing the letter quoted Nelson as warning, “We are living in a society in which gun violence is making everyone vulnerable to premature death.” At the press conference, the PCUSA lobbyist looked toward “the eradication of gun violence in the United States.” Recalling that Jan. 15 was the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson asserted, “I am convinced that if he [King] were here today, this issue would be the priority of his leadership.”

Nelson noted how December’s massacre of schoolchildren in Newtown, Conn., “brought this issue of gun violence to the fore.”

He expressed a sense of urgency: “No longer can faith communities stand idly by and commit to performing burials while bowing to [pro-gun] lobbyists whose motivations are driven by a false standard of profit and power.” The denominational official declared, “Our purpose here today is to declare that our faith perspectives and holy books call us, first and foremost, to love one another, not to protect ourselves against one another.”

Nelson denounced “a culture of violence that self-perpetuates and makes gun violence acceptable.” To “eradicate gun violence,” he said, “there must be a change of heart and Spirit in our nation.”

Introducing himself at the press conference, Nelson stated: “I represent nearly two million members of our denomination [the PCUSA]. I also represent today the National Council of Churches, which includes 37 Christian denomi-

nations and their over 100,000 congregations and 45 million persons in the United States.” The “Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence” press release touted the endorsement of “47 national religious leaders representing over 80 million Americans.”

There does not appear to be any survey data by which one could test Nelson’s claim to have the backing of nearly two-million Presbyterians.

If PCUSA members resemble the general population – which, politically, they often do – then they are probably divided on questions of gun control.

In any case, Nelson’s advocacy is based upon many General Assembly resolutions going back at least to 1968.

The most recent resolution, from 2010, recommends “licensing, registration, and waiting periods to allow comprehensive background checks, and cooling-off periods, for all guns sold.”

The resolution also favors “ban[ning] semiautomatic assault weapons, armor piercing handgun ammunition, and .50-caliber sniper rifles.”

The Jan. 15 press conference came just a day before President Obama rolled out a new set of gun control proposals, which track closely with the positions espoused by the religious officials.

Nelson and many of those same officials will also be in step with Obama’s high-profile push to liberalize immigration laws.

And they have already taken the President’s side in disputes with House Republicans over how to address government deficits and debts.

## Presbytery files petition before U.S. Supreme Court

The Layman

The Presbytery of Ohio Valley, along with the Synod of Lincoln Trails, is asking that its case against an Indiana congregation be heard by the U.S. Supreme Court.

On July 31, 2012, the Indiana Supreme Court published its opinion in the case of the *Presbytery of Ohio Valley and the Synod of Lincoln Trails of the Presbyterian Church (USA) vs. Olivet Presbyterian Church of Evansville, Inc.*

The court’s decision established Indiana as a “neutral principles of law” state. “Because the neutral-principles-of-law approach permits greater fairness, consistency, and equality of application to all church property disputes regardless of the structure of the denominational church organization, we adopt the neutral-principles-of-law approach for settling property disputes between religious organizations in Indiana,” it read.

The presbytery and synod recently filed a petition for *writ of certiorari* with the U.S. Supreme

Court, stating that “This case presents an important and recurring issue concerning religious freedom and the standards for resolving church property disputes. ... The petition should be granted because the Indiana decision directly implicates a conflict in decisions among state courts on a fundamental issue of federal law. The PCUSA Property Trust Clause is subject to conflicting interpretations in different states, and this national church organization is denied the uniformity that is essential to its polity.”

The *writ* argued that the Indiana Supreme Court’s decision affects other denominations and thousands of churches.

“This court should grant this petition to ensure that the intentions of religious organizations who changed their constitutions like the PCUSA and of congregations like Olivet who pledged to abide by such constitutions are given effect. Moreover, this court should ensure that the burdens of following a neutral principles approach

are no greater for hierarchical, national denominations than they are for more localized, congregational churches,” read the writ.

In its decision, the Indiana Supreme Court remanded the case back to a trial court, because “Genuine issues of disputed fact, resulting from varying inferences possible from the designated evidence, must be resolved at trial rather than on summary judgment.”

*To help equip churches facing legal matters and to inform churches of legal matters pertaining to property, The Layman offers an online resource of legal documents: [www.layman.org/Resources/Legal\\_Resource\\_Databank.aspx](http://www.layman.org/Resources/Legal_Resource_Databank.aspx)*



# Rising from the ashes

*continued from page 1*

In some ways, Hughes has played the role of a modern-day Moses, leading his congregants on a sometimes nomadic journey to worship the Lord. They have gathered in other buildings and spent a chunk of their worship time together in sprung structures – or bubble-like tents.

“They’re nice and have served their purpose,” Hughes said of the temporary structures, “but they’re not the same as a new sanctuary. Meeting in those is getting old. (The move) into the new sanctuary will solidify our church in so many ways.”

The new sanctuary and some classrooms were built on the same site of the previous facility that was ravaged by the Canyon wildfire that swept through southern California in October 2007, destroying the church and 21 other structures as it blazed across 4,500 acres. This is the first of several construction phases and cost about \$10 million – all covered by the church’s insurance policy – to complete.

Hughes said the structure is in the same footprint of the former building of the church, started in 1948, but this is a different design from that of its predecessor. It’s a more modern look that will provide enhanced fire resistance and larger windows to allow those attending services to take in the beautiful scenic view of the ocean from the church that sits on a hill overlooking Santa Monica Bay.

“It’s a very stunning sanctuary that is warm and inviting; it has an intimate feel to it,” said Hughes, adding that additional construction phases will provide administrative offices, classes for the children/youth department and a fellowship hall/community center.

Hughes vividly recalls the day the fire swept through the church. He arrived around 6 a.m. on Sunday, Oct. 21, 2007, to make final preparations for that day’s services. He and fellow church leaders and members were aware that the advancing wildfire was near, and he remembers seeing

smoke in the distance that morning.

“I knew the fire was in the canyon and thought we might have to miss one service because it was getting close,” he said. “But then the police came and started evacuating people in the area. The hillside was on fire before I left. By the time I got home, our folks were watching on television as our building burned down.”

Hughes said embers from the massive blaze ignited a fire in the steeple that quickly spread throughout the structure.

Just a day earlier, Malibu Presbyterian Church had pledged \$500,000 to assist with the construction of a teen center in Los Angeles. Less than 24 hours later, the church building was nothing but charred remains, a pile of burned rubble left over from a structure that sat on the hillside looking out across the ocean.

The church’s session came together, and even faced with losing its own place of worship decided to move ahead and give the money to help reach inner-city teens.

“In the midst of all this, our church continued to be one that is

about giving,” Hughes said as he spoke of the generous gift the membership still made to uphold its commitment.

Just as Malibu Presbyterian gave, so did other organizations that graciously came to the aid of MPC and its membership of approximately 300.

The Malibu Jewish Center allowed the church’s preschool program to meet at its synagogue.



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**Firefighters battle the fire at the Malibu church after embers from a fast moving brush fire caught the steeple, then the attic on fire.**



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**Member Marilyn Baumeister writes Scripture on the floor of the new sanctuary.**

Webster Elementary School, Our Lady of Malibu Catholic Church and the Malibu Performing Arts Center also gave space to be used for services and meetings. And then there were four years spent in the temporary shelter of the tents.

“It has been a distraction; we need a building and to be able to function,” Hughes said. “But (distraction) is not what we’re about. We’re about connecting people to God, and that’s what we’ve been doing.”

In November members of MPC gathered to write passages of Scripture and prayers on the concrete floor of the new sanctuary during the construction process, noting that God’s Word, more than steel supports, truly is the church’s foundation.

On Jan. 23, congregants gathered to have a prayer and dedication service, all leading up to their first worship service in the new sanctuary.

“Everything that has happened just confirms that the church is not the building,” Hughes explained. “Our church has survived and thrived despite all we have faced. I wouldn’t wish this on anyone, but in many ways it has been a blessing in disguise. We have kept on with our mission here in this community and around the world, sending mission teams to Brazil, Mexico and Haiti along with those working right here.”

That resolve shown by members of Malibu Presbyterian Church has impressed Hughes.

“Attending church has not been easy, but our commitments to each other and Christ are much stronger because of this,” Hughes said. “There were times that have been very challenging. Our church burned down, but we’re fired up for Christ. He certainly has sustained us and brought us up out of the ashes.”

# Introducing ...

## *A Devotional Commentary on the Westminster Confession of 1647*



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and allusions to many more, it is no substitute for reading Scripture itself.

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