



PEACE RIVER
PRESBYTERY



Dear Colleagues and Friends,

More Thoughts on the Orlando Fellowship Gathering:

If one is married, and has been married for a long time, is the only way to fall in love all over again to go out and get a divorce?"

(Note – this is a continuation of what I wrote in the monthly *Interpreter* for February as well as in the last Weekly Pastoral Letter.)

Introduction

Two weeks ago in Orlando, Florida, the Fellowship of Presbyterians that first met in August 2011 gathered again for the purpose of forming a new reformed denomination (Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians). As I mentioned last week, I am not writing to endorse either the FOP or the ECO, but I want to keep you informed about decisions made elsewhere that may impact our denomination.

Immediately after the Orlando meeting, I wrote some initial reflections in last week's Weekly [Pastoral Letter](#). Also in that letter we included a [bulletin insert](#) from *The Presbyterian Outlook* that our presbytery has purchased for your use in reporting and interpreting these events. You have permission to use this document any way you wish – as a bulletin insert, for distribution to your session or congregation or even in an e-mail publication. This insert provides an accurate report of the events so that we are all working with the same information.

Theological Reflections – Part II (Part I was shared in [last week's pastoral letter](#))

Ever since Jesus gathered his disciples, the church, and we as disciples of Jesus 100 years later, then 1000, and now 2000 years later, have been trying to understand what it means in any given time to be faithful. In fact, the reformation project 500 years ago became an exercise in trying to define as closely as possible the essence of what God desired for and from this sacred community of faith that exists in the world as the body of Christ.

I appreciated and agreed with a couple of the speakers at the Fellowship event who tried to frame the conversation and remind everyone related to the forming of this new reformed body that creating a new denomination will not create the pure church --- nor will joining this reformed body insure the growth and success of every church that becomes a part of that body. That is an illusion and will lead to disappointment. Note: Jesus did say the wheat and tares will grow up together, and I am not suggesting or implying who is the wheat and who are the tares, only that Jesus made a point of saying that living in this community of faith will sometimes be messy and not always straightforward.

A personal confession: ever since seminary I have always been amazed and humbled by what I have learned from those with whom I disagree. If I would have cut myself off from them prematurely, whatever wisdom, insight, faith, hope and love I learned from them by staying in relationship would have been lost to me, and that would have been too bad!

With that in mind, after an excellent sermon and presentation by one of the leaders of FOP, I happened to meet him at lunch and had a one-on-one conversation with him. After introducing myself and then sharing appreciation for some of what he preached, I shared my concern, which I stated as follows: ***"If one is married, and has been married for a long time, is the only way to fall in love all over again to go out and get a divorce?"*** (And I used that as an analogy to what I was hearing as the rationale for a new denomination, i.e., we all just need a fresh start, we need to stop fighting, and we need to get in better alignment around core beliefs, etc.). He said that was a really good question... which he then said again as

he thought about what he wanted to say. He finally answered it by saying, "I guess it all depends on context."

To be clear, I believe, as I have strongly said many times before, in what Jesus prayed and pleaded with God the Father that the church would be one (i.e., "That they may be one as the Father and I are One" - John 17). By no means am I wanting or suggesting that anything goes. We have an historic tradition in which we live, and we also have a polity that we as ruling and teaching elders have promised and vowed to live within. We are a sacred community. We may have lost some of the ways we can be and must be meaningfully connected together as sacred community; however, I take Jesus' prayer and commandment seriously as I know each one here in Peace River does as well.

Some of the Details as to what the Fellowship Proposed

[Note: Some of the following information (the parts in quotes) was adapted from a well-done piece in the "Pastoral Letter of the Presbytery of New Covenant", and some additional thoughts are based on my own personal observations at the Orlando Conference.

"At this point The Fellowship of Presbyterians (FOP) will exist as an organization that stands both inside and outside the PCUSA. It will be primarily a way for evangelical Presbyterians (mostly PCUSA, but others are welcome) to gather for worship and workshops, and to connect with other evangelical Presbyterians, many of whom disagree with recent changes within the PCUSA regarding ordination standards. The vast majority of the 2,000 people who gathered in Orlando came to participate in the FOP and to observe the formation of the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (ECO). At the conclusion of the FOP, attendees were asked to indicate their interest in one of three options: join the FOP; form a "union" congregation (PCUSA and ECO); or leave the PCUSA and join ECO. By one estimate, about 75% of those in attendance expressed an intention to join the FOP; 12 congregations indicated a desire to form a "union" congregation; and 30 congregations are preparing to leave PCUSA and join ECO."

"For those who are curious about the polity details of the ECO, here are a few of the specifics, some of which are still "fluid" and changeable. The new denomination will have a mandatory initial per capita. The structure will be "flat" with synods but no General Assembly. Initially, there will be three presbyteries – East, Central and West and presumably, one synod. A presbytery may be constituted with a minimum of ten congregations and a maximum of 20 congregations. Voting members of presbyteries will be congregations, pastors serving congregations, pastors with validated ministries and honorably retired ministers. All property will be held by the congregation and presbyteries will not be allowed to guarantee loans. ECO will recognize and celebrate the gifts of women for ministry. It will seek membership in the World Communion of Reformed Churches. Its polity (a 30 page "book of order") will not be finalized until an August meeting. Candidates for ministry will be expected to complete an undergraduate degree and ordinarily a master's degree from an accredited seminary. It will reinstitute the office of Assistant Pastor, called either by the session or the pastor/Head of Staff."

"The 'Draft of the Theology' of the ECO (a 12-page document) adopts all Confessions in our current constitution. All officers will be expected to adhere to written 'essential tenets' (but only the major points in **bold** and not necessarily the details of each tenet). As with the polity, the theology of the ECO will be unfolding in the future."

Conclusion

Personally, while I see the value of the FOP for those of like mind, I am deeply concerned and troubled by the formation of the ECO. I will continue to encourage congregations in our presbytery to remain within the PCUSA because I believe God is still leading us into an exciting future and energizing mission. One example is some of the creative thinking and work of the Mission, Vision, and Standing Rules Guide Team that has already been considering some of the ideas that FOP has suggested as a rationale for forming the new ECO. So, those who need to differentiate themselves theologically may find the FOP to be an appropriate means of expressing their theological convictions in a similar way that Covenant Network is a gathering place for those with a more progressive theology.

Again, over the next year I am sure we will have lively and interesting, deep but respectful, honest and honoring conversations with one another as we wait on the Lord and as we dream again... and soar.

Thanks be to God who continues to be the wind in our sails and helps us steer into the future!

Peace,

Graham

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Churches in the News – please send a link if your church is in the news.

There is a great [article in the Bradenton Herald](#) titled “Palma Sola Presbyterian working toward a new day”. It highlights some of the church’s past, present challenges and hopeful signs. The church is currently served by interim pastor Paul Eckel who speaks of his role as an interim. This is a must read article.

Please add these concerns to your personal prayer list.

Please continue to pray for:

Rev. Dr. David Uhl
Rev. Rosemary Gremban
Rev. Dr. Ted Land
Rev. Dr. Bob Rea
Pastors and Educators in transition
Those affected by natural disasters in the United States
Nations in crisis

Please also keep in your prayers:

Beth-El Farmworker Ministry
Misión Peniel
Cedarkirk Camp and Conference Center

PLEASE PRAY FOR THE CONGREGATION OF THE WEEK – February 5

Church of the Palms, Sarasota, was organized in 1957 with 168 members. The first worship service was held on Easter Sunday, April 21. Since that time the church has shown steady growth. The current membership is over 2400 plus 200 Affiliate Members.

In September of 2008, we welcomed our Senior Pastor, the Reverend Dr. Stephen D. McConnell. His leadership here has provided new areas of growth and outreach.

As Church of the Palms has grown, so have its ministries. The Tutoring program, Food Pantry, Televised Worship, Presbyterian Women, Palms Men, Student Ministry and Early Childhood Center are a few of the local important programs of our church, as well as numerous National and International missions.

As the historic oak tree in the middle of the courtyard reminds, we are a church that is rooted in faith, reaching out in love.

For more information, visit www.churchofthepalms.org.

LIST FOR THE MONTH OF FEBRUARY:

February 5	Church of the Palms, Sarasota Steve McConnell, Pastor smcconnell@churchofthepalms.org Bruce Hedgepeth, Associate Pastor bhedgepeth@churchofthepalms.org
February 12	First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota John Ross, Interim Pastor jross@firstpressarasota.org Clay Thomas, Associate Pastor associatepastor@firstpressarasota.org
February 19	Northminster Presbyterian Church, Sarasota Chris Carlson, Pastor pastorchris@npcsarasota.org
February 26	Pine Shores Presbyterian Church, Sarasota Bruce Wismer, Co-Pastor pastors@pineshorespres.org Karen Wismer, Co-Pastor Karen@pineshorespres.org



New Theology, Worship and Education director named
Meet the Rev. Charles "Chip" Hardwick the new director of Theology, Worship and Education for the GAMC.



Satisfying the hunger
Check out the new blog written by the ministry staff of Evangelism and Church Growth.

The articles below may interest you. I have found some of them in my reading, and others have been passed on to me. Just click on the underlined phrases.

Article: Workplace

Nonprofits credit social media for success

MomsRising and charity: water have accomplished much in a short time. Here are some tips on how they did it, with the effective use of social media. [Read more »](#)

Q&A: Traditioned Innovation

Elizabeth Drescher: Digital ministry, made for the mainline

Networked, relational and incarnational, digital ministry is a good fit for the mainline, a chance to make the privatized practice of faith public and visible in the world again, says the author and scholar. [Read more »](#)

Q&A: Vocation

Mark DeVries: Investment drives results

Healthy youth ministry is not based on a single charismatic leader, says an expert in the field. It requires congregations to invest in staff and create a vision.

[Read more »](#)

Reflection: Wellbeing

Allison Backous: Discovering lectio divina

A teacher of *lectio divina* finds that she needs this ancient practice as much as her students do. [Read more »](#)

Article: Future of Denominations

Quiz: Navigating the world of Christian nonprofits

The rise of independent churches and the blurring of denominational boundaries have led to a boom in Christian nonprofit organizations. The challenge for church leaders is to respond to the growth of these parachurch organizations in ways that strengthen their identity and mission. Take our quiz to test your knowledge of Christian nonprofits. [Read more »](#)

Reflection: Theology

Mark Ralls: The scientist and the theology student

During his morning runs with a fellow student in Germany, a Christian ponders his friend the atheist's question: When did life begin?

[Read more »](#)



[Young lawyer fights for social justice on her way to becoming a nun](#)

The (New Orleans) Times-Picayune: Alison McCrary sees her role as a lawyer fighting for social justice meshing perfectly with becoming a nun.

[There is no 'war on religion'](#)

Time: It's true that Christianity is losing some of its appeal among Americans, but that is a religious, not political, matter, says Jon Meacham.

[Christians fear losing freedoms in Arab Spring movement](#)

USA Today: Rise of Islamic parties is creating near-panic among ancient Christian communities that dot the Muslim world and predate Islam by centuries.

[Mosque opening on hold after vandals trash windows](#)

Centreville (Va.) Patch: Under the cover of darkness, vandals down alcohol, throw rocks and smash the windows of a Chantilly, Va., mosque.

PRESBYTERY CALENDAR (for more details, go to www.peacriverpresbytery.org)

FEBRUARY, 2012

2nd

Records and Overtures

4th

Presbyterian Women Annual Gathering at Church of the Palms

7th

Mission, Vision, Standing Rules Guide Team

8th

Committee on Preparation for Ministry

9th

Board of Trustees

Leadership and Congregational Development

Personnel

Nominations via conference call

14th

Committee on Ministry

16th

Theology and Worship

21st

Evangelism and Church Development

23rd

Stated Meeting at Palma Sola, Bradenton