

## **The Fellowship of Presbyterians: Destructive Storm or Fresh Wind?**

Reflections on the Gathering in Minneapolis, August 25-26, 2011

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Hurricane Irene has come and gone. For many of us in the Northeast she proved to be less of a menace than her media hype promised, though that is easy to say as someone who was mostly just inconvenienced by the storm. Electricity may not be a necessity, but it is really nice and sorely missed when gone.

As Irene rumbled up the Atlantic seaboard, forecasters worked feverishly to predict her path and project her power. In the end, they were more right than wrong about her path and probably overestimated her ability to maintain her power as she chugged northward. But that Irene did not live up to her billing is of little solace to those whose homes and livelihoods may have been destroyed by rising flood waters and falling trees.

The first [Gathering of the Fellowship of Presbyterians](#) in Minneapolis, August 25-26, 2011, has also come and gone and there will be a lot of conversation as to its impact – good, bad or otherwise – and whether or not it lived up to its billing – good, bad or otherwise. Like Irene who has blown out to sea, never to return, the Gathering is now all past tense. But like an as yet unnamed storm churning in the mid-Atlantic, the Fellowship of Presbyterians will keep moving and its path and power are hard to predict. As the organizers of the Gathering said on several occasions, their hope was not to plan an event, but to help start a movement.

Well, so much for the storm metaphor, though depending on your perspective, the destruction and disruption brought by Irene may be an apt figure for the aftermath of the Gathering. (And because hearing the voices of those less encouraged than I am is important, here are the blog sites of two Presbytery staff people who were not so encouraged: [A Church for Starving Artists](#) (the blogger is an interim associate presbyter for Chicago Presbytery) and [Regional Ponderings](#) (the blogger is the Regional Presbyter for two presbyteries in New Mexico).)

Hope and possibility are my preferred ways of looking at what the Gathering brought and what I look to as we move into the post-Gathering period.

Several times during the Gathering we were asked not to be discouraged or angry by the church we have become but to look forward to the church we might be. The Gathering succeeded well at giving us a glimpse of who we might be. Specifically, the four times of corporate worship were powerful. The leadership was talented, the messages well-crafted and the planning and execution nearly flawless. A well-connected Presbyterian posted on a Face Book page that it was one of the best Presbyterian events he has ever been to. I am not well-connected and have not been to that many “Presbyterian events,” but would concur.

Another piece of the conference worth noting was the use of small groups as a major component of the time together. I was one of 195 small group leaders, and, frankly, was not looking forward to the assignment or the amount of time committed to small groups.

Amazingly, the logistics of moving 1,950 Presbyterians into small groups in ten or so different conference rooms worked well. We were in assigned groups and great care had been taken to ensure balance and representation in the groups. The energy and conversation in my group was excellent and that was the experience in other groups according to those with whom I talked.

There were two break-out sessions offering a total of ten options. Of the two I attended, one was fair and one was superb. I'll take the average.

I mention these details because I think they provided a glimpse of the larger church as it might be – like-minded (not same-minded, as we were reminded) Presbyterians with a passion for Christ, mission, evangelism and discipleship. This is not a church consumed by strategizing for the next vote or interested in winning the battle for the bureaucracy.

The experience of the Gathering of the Fellowship of Presbyterians was powerful, positive and purposeful. It is never easy, in fact always impossible, to fully convey the emotion and spirit of an experience. In this case it is important to know how foundational the planned event was to the beginning of the movement.

So what is the path and what is the potential power of the Fellowship of Presbyterians? The Fellowship [website](#) will be the best place to listen in or contribute to the on-going conversation. But in general, and for LPC in particular, the Fellowship proposes to be a movement with several options or tiers to accommodate within its bounds a large number of individuals and congregations looking forward to the church we might become.

- Some will remain in their same presbytery because they choose to or discern no other choice in the matter. But they will find the Fellowship as a way to *differentiate* themselves from the broader ethos of their presbytery or the denomination by affirming the yet to be framed statement of faith essentials of the Fellowship. They may join in networks and affiliations of similarly minded individuals and or congregations for mutual support and/or common mission and ministry. This is what was described as “Tier One” at the Gathering.
- Some will look for ways to differentiate themselves more formally through the creation of new structures within the PCUSA. These new structures might be concurrent, conjunct or non-geographical presbyteries, “Presbyterian orders,” or other structures now possible within our polity or possible with the passage of overtures to be proposed to the 2012 General Assembly. I have conflated Tiers Two and Three in this description.
- Others may join in the creation of a new reformed body institutionally separate but missionally and relationally connected to the PCUSA. Within this new reformed body would be congregations and pastors who have sought formal dismissal from the PCUSA and others who remain within the PCUSA but seek association or non-formal affiliation with the new body. This is what was described as Tier Four, but might include some “Tier One” churches and individuals as associated or affiliated participants.

One of the strengths of this tentative Fellowship design is that it provides options for those who look forward to the church we might become. Some need only differentiation and some wish separation. The Fellowship allows connection to remain. Some have a deep desire to remain within the PCUSA, some have limited choices for formal separation. The fellowship allows connection to remain.

So what is ahead? Those who first conceived of the idea of the Fellowship will continue to work with an expanded group of leaders to prepare for a second gathering in January, what some are calling a constitutional convention. By that time a statement of faith essentials will have been drafted and some of the necessary organizational structure of a new reformed body will have been built. Some options, especially those in Tiers Two and Three – new structures within the PCUSA, will have been further developed and possible General Assembly overtures crafted. Other options will have been discarded for lack of support or feasibility.

This second gathering will take place January 12-14 in Orlando, Florida. The agenda has not yet been announced, nor is it fully known. Much must happen during the next four months. But even when all the materials are ready and all the ideas published, there will be a lot still unknown. Already at the first Gathering we were tempted to ask “what about this?” and “how would that work?” Good questions, but perhaps the analogy of a constitutional convention is helpful.

Those who gathered in Philadelphia, just 24 miles from where I write, in 1787 did not have answers to lots of questions as they ratified the American Constitution. On the last day of the convention, [Benjamin Franklin addressed](#) George Washington, the president of the convention, “I consent, Sir, to this Constitution because I expect no better, and because I am not sure, that it is not the best.” He went on to say, “On the whole, Sir, I can not help expressing a wish that every member of the Convention who may still have objections to it, would with me, on this occasion doubt a little of his own infallibility, and to make manifest our unanimity, put his name to this instrument.”

We are early in a process; we cannot yet track the path of what may have begun in Minneapolis or whether it will organize itself into a genuine movement towards the church we pray we might become. At this point, however, I would affirm the great need for those who are like-minded in our desire to move from anger and regret about who we are and to begin to make intentional movement towards what we might become. I believe the need is urgent and time not unlimited. I would borrow Franklin’s words that I expect no better than what began in Minneapolis and that I am not sure that it will not be the best.

I will encourage the elders at Langhorne Presbyterian to stay well-informed, participate and support the process during the next four months as we are able, and, should the our current projections hold, plan on “putting our name to the instrument” in January.