

Several pastors have indicated to me personally that their church would like to consider the possibility of leaving Shenango Presbytery and the PC(USA). I suspect that there are other churches not known to me that are in the same position.

Six weeks ago I sent a pastoral letter in which I wrote:

If your church wants to consider leaving, I pledge to you as Presbytery Executive, I will support your right to do so and encourage the Presbytery to receive your decision graciously...if your congregation makes that decision prayerfully, thoughtfully and with full integrity.

Most of us have never gone through times like these...a season in which our congregation considered such a momentous decision. Even the pastors of the Presbytery have very limited information on the issues involved. Most of us have never considered what this decision would mean for our congregation in 10, 30 or 50 years from now. It is incumbent upon us to pray like we have never prayed before and study the issues from all possible angles. Our decisions in the next year will be judged for generations.

Pastors bear the burden of knowing that virtually no church ever leaves a denomination unless the pastor encourages it to leave...and virtually no church ever leaves a denomination if the pastor counsels staying. Pastors bear a huge burden which they cannot ultimately avoid.

If pastors have a vital role in these decisions, elders are close behind. What elder can testify that he/she has an exhaustive understanding of the issues involved in a choice like this. Your session had better pray and do its homework before it makes a recommendation to the congregation either to stay or go. Like your pastor, you cannot avoid leadership one way or the other. The members of your congregation are depending on you for great maturity and wisdom.

One of the problems that our sessions have in making a recommendation is meeting the integrity standard that I mentioned earlier. I checked the records for attendance by sessions at the five Presbytery meetings in 2010. Here is what I found:

- 22 churches were not represented by an elder at any Presbytery meeting in 2010
- 14 churches were represented by 1 elder throughout the entire year
- 20 churches were represented by 2 different elders throughout the year
- Only 4 churches were represented by 3 different elders throughout the year

In other words, very few elders from your session attended a Presbytery meeting last year. I would estimate from this data that less than half of the elders who serve on our sessions ever attend a Presbytery meeting...even once...throughout 2 terms totaling 6 years on the session. Ask your own session at your next meeting. See if this is accurate. How many have ever attended a Presbytery meeting? This is true in spite of promising in ordination vows that you will serve in the governing bodies of the church. If this is true in your session, how would the session be able to say that you know what you are leaving?

Most churches leaving the PC(USA) are going to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC). If you agree with me that the majority of elders have no idea what they are leaving, how many of them do you think have any idea of that to which they would be going?

Most of our ministers serving churches attend some Presbytery meetings each year, but many of even the most conscientious have never been to a PC(USA) General Assembly. Virtually none of us ministers have any significant knowledge about the EPC.

I bring this to your attention not to condemn or criticize our elders and ministers. What I have just said is true of every presbytery. If you attend every Shenango Presbytery meeting during the year you will spend fewer hours than you would in any other of the 172 presbyteries. This Presbytery does not qualify as the most time-consuming or disagreeable. Those who have been elsewhere can bear witness. And the elders and ministers in other presbyteries would not have any better attendance record than in Shenango. So my comments are not to single out Shenango elders and ministers.

What I do wish to say is that this question about remaining in Shenango Presbytery is serious business before God. We have all taken solemn vows when we were ordained. We are in the midst of extraordinary times and some of your sessions will make the decision to lead your congregation through a discernment process about the future of your church in Shenango Presbytery. I simply rise to remind you of the magnitude of the moment. If you embark on this path, pray without ceasing, read the Word, listen deeply to other ministers and elders, and revisit your ordination vows.

This is not business as usual for the churches of Shenango Presbytery. We are blessed with a Special Committee to help with this: Bill Hoffman, Glenn Hink, Amy Na, Donna Heard, Jerry Mahaffey, Arnie Morris. Let them know what you need. Even if your church is not undertaking this discernment, please pray fervently for those churches which are.

David Dawson
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