

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

A great dinner party

Gathering explores church's changing leadership needs in the "wilderness days" of the 21st century

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Philadelphia

Coming from the Rev. Bill Golderer, the use of the "dinner party" metaphor was perhaps just as significant as the invitation itself.

In welcoming the participants to this first-of-its-kind Pastoral Leadership Gathering, held here from Nov. 9-11, Broad Street Ministry's convening minister and the host of its radical "No Barriers Dinner" – where every month members of Philadelphia's most divergent populations, from the city's homeless to its movers and shakers, build community at table – said that this gathering had the potential to be a "great dinner party."

"Part of it relies on me as host, but most of it depends on you," Golderer said. "It has been my experience that too few educational encounters have the potential to transform. We tend to go away convinced of what we already know or we resist being open to new things. Here the right people will be in the room and we all have the potential to grow. I can't wait for you to know each other."

Jointly sponsored by Broad Street Ministry (BSM) and Arch Street Presbyterian Church, the gathering attracted some 125 pastors and presbytery leaders who arrived here hungry to experience a unique and unconventional approach to creating community, a model which they were then invited to apply in their respective congregational contexts.

"Now and again the structures within which we work bust wide open and encourage you to do some things like this," Golderer said. "And this gathering was in part underwritten by the Presbytery of Philadelphia, so yeah judicatory structures!"

The gathering opened with an exercise designed to have participants engage the "mission field" as they broke into eight small groups to explore the community context within walking distance of the Arch Street Church, branching out into areas as diverse as Philadelphia's Chinatown and Love Park.

Reflecting on his experience of the exercise in the light of the radically changing context of pastoral ministry, the Rev. Dr. Timothy Cargal, interim associate for Preparation for Ministry/Exams in the PC(USA)'s Office of



Gary Weaver, executive presbyter of Mission Presbytery, and Philip Lotspeich, engage the community.

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Vocation, wrote in his blog, "A couple of blocks away [from the church] a colleague and I happened upon the Witherspoon Building, which is no longer related to the Presbyterian Church and hasn't been for more than a decade. All living things — including 'things' like communities and churches — change. What is different now is the rate of change. Not even memorializing murals or words and seals carved in stone can slow down change as it races forward."

The Rev. Marcia Clark Myers, director of the PC(USA)'s Office of Vocation, who also attended the gathering, cited the recent report of the PC(USA)'s Joint Committee on Leadership Needs — *Raising Up Leaders for the Mission of God* — which concludes that "it's critical that the church be led by those who know how to lead creative change, are innovative and entrepreneurial, are experimental in revitalizing existing communities and are capable of establishing new ministries that engage the culture."

"The joint committee's leadership paper is an invitation into an ongoing conversation, which is exactly why we're here," Myers said.



Susan Andrews

Evening worship brought continued emphasis to the theme of the church's changing leadership needs within a rapidly changing context for ministry, as the Rev. Dr. Susan R. Andrews, general presbyter of Hudson River Presbytery and Moderator of the 215th General Assembly (2003), preached eloquently and powerfully on Jesus' invitation in John 1:35-42 to "come and see."

Describing the "balcony" from which she both observes and serves her community in suburban New York City, Andrews poignantly noted that not only do "beauty and brokenness live side by side in this world we call home," but are also "a reality of this church that so many of us call home."

"We are gathered here in Philadelphia to talk about pastoral leadership of this conflicted, chaotic, crumbling reality of the 21st Century church," Andrews preached. "And the first thing we learn from Jesus is that leaders begin as disciples. Disciples are called to answer the questions, 'What are you looking for,' 'What are we looking for,' and 'What is the world looking for?' It seems that if leaders are first of all disciples, we are not expected to have answers, but we are expected to have the questions."

Andrews concluded that the conventional "leadership that has served the church well for the last 50 years can no longer sustain the church." Introducing leadership concepts that would form the foundation of the ensuing day's session facilitated by Peter Block — an internationally recognized organizational development consultant and author of *Community: The Structure of Belonging* — Andrews said, "As Peter Block suggests, leadership in these wilderness days is about getting out of the way, about convening instead about controlling, about inviting instead of instructing, about questioning instead of convincing, about letting God be in



Peter Block

charge while we simply abide. Abide with Jesus, abide with one another, and abide intimately with a troubled world."

In giving the gathering a day-long opportunity to understand, engage and attempt his theory and model of building community, Block emphasized the path through which the initiation of an alternative future is possible.

"Transformation and restoration occur through the power of language," Block said. "Questions are more transformative than answers and are the essential tools of engagement."

Block invited the gathering to engage a series of powerful questions in small groups, which he sees as the "unit of transformation." As the gathering's participants entered into a new conversation – shifting the emphasis from problem solving to possibility – the process of communal transformation began and a new collegiality was achieved.

"I am always amazed – or maybe it's awed – by the capacity of people to respond to being loved," said the Rev. Daniel Morse, a tentmaking minister serving the First Presbyterian Church of Port Kennedy in King of Prussia, Pa., while working as a carpenter. "I believe that is what we, the church, do best: respond to being loved."

On the gathering's final day, participants had the opportunity to share reflections and debrief in small groups on their community-building experience, engaging Block's main precepts. Those conversations were facilitated by John Franke, the Clemens Professor of Missional Theology at Biblical Seminary in Hatfield, Pa., who is soon to join the staff of First Presbyterian Church of Allentown, Pa., as its theologian-in-residence.

In closing, Franke observed that models such as Block's do not mean "getting rid of leadership, but rather coming up with different metaphors, such as 'community architect.'"

"It's not a getting rid of, but a rethinking," he said.

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Agency: General Assembly Mission Council

CONTACT PC(USA):

Phone: (800) 728-7228

Email: info@pcusa.org

100 Witherspoon Street
Louisville, KY 40202