



Sharing the Good News!

Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ

2009 PNEC Annual Meeting: SURVIVE – OR – THRIVE?

by Alan C. Miller, Conference Minister

Last week I had dinner with a very exciting twenty-nine year old young man from our Conference. This talented and bright young man literally grew-up and found his faith through our Conference. From experiences as a child at the PNEC Community Camp through his teenage trips to Conference Annual Meetings and work camps, regional and national United Church of Christ Youth Events, and attendance and participation in a number of General Synods he had found a faith deeply rooted in Jesus Christ and motivated by Christ's words to take the Gospel to all the world.

His conversation over dinner vacillated between frustration and excitement. He loves the people and the pastor at his home congregation, but after one term on consistory he felt so frustrated that he was sure he could not serve a second term. He told me how "fed" he felt by the worship services at General Synod and by listening to the stories and testimonies of our world missionaries. And then he told me about how frustrated he felt by three hour consistory meetings during which the only topics were: building repairs, fund raisers, and planning next year's bazaar. I asked him what he was looking for, and he very clearly told me "a faith community that values discipleship and mission more than anything else."

Friends ... this gifted young man is not alone. I have had countless conversations with young people ranging in age from sixteen through their mid-thirties who are not feeling "fed" by our congregations. They are people who are craving a deep and living spirituality. Our generation keeps preaching sermons that "the church is not the

building" but these wonderful young people "know that the church is not the building." They are looking for communities where their faith and biblical knowledge can be nurtured and they can have opportunities to actively engage in mission, and they don't care whether those communities meet in a church building, a house, or a rented classroom. They like contemporary praise music, but a contemporary service in itself is not enough to catch their attention. They are looking for ways in which they can grow in their depth of love for God and each other and in which they can truly make a difference in the world.

To me this type of searching sounds incredibly familiar to the stories of the early church in the book of Acts.

Can our traditional congregations whose style is still reminiscent of a 1950's understanding of the church make the changes necessary to help this hungry generation find a place to be "fed" and to live out their Christian vocation? I don't know – change is hard and slow in coming! But the leadership of our Conference believes that this is such an important priority that we have dedicated our next two Annual Meetings to addressing these questions. I hope you'll be there! What about you? Do you want your congregation to merely survive or are you looking for it to thrive?

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