The Geography of Mission
With this issue of Chimes, we introduce Linking Lives—a logo, but more importantly, an expression of participation in mission. This is linking our lives to meaningfully connect and help each other through open ended, long-term relationships.

Flying geese represent that there are seasons to things, they are headed together in the same direction with an arrow-shape, and most importantly, they each take turns in the lead—flying 70 percent faster than each could do alone—honking from behind, cheering the leader on. Their support of each other is cyclical, shared, and collaborative. They are heading together...supporting each other.

The logo reflects the shared leadership and interdependence that long has been the tradition of the people of Westminster—indeed, this is at the core of our understanding of mission and participation. This is the “location”—the geography, if you will—of the conviction that everything we do, at some level, is an expression of mission and a response to God’s call to be a faithful people.

Participation in...

You will have noticed a number of things about Chimes this year: a particular theme per issue; quarterly; magazine format, etc. We have also tried out different kinds and weights of paper; we have mailed the Chimes to each household as well as published it electronically and placed it on the web site.

This issue introduces Linking Lives and attempts to stimulate your own reflection of how mission as participation touches your life—and how it touches every area of all of our lives. How well does that resonate with you?

And, one more “participation,” please—let us know how we’re doing in this year of discerning what/how/when the Chimes can best serve us as a congregation. Please send your comments to Peter Larson (Moderator, Communications Committee – peter@4larsons.com) or Becky Stein-Wells (beckyw@wpcgr.org or 717-5532). Thanks!

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Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Grace and peace to you in the Lord Jesus Christ and God our Creator.

In this issue of the Chimes you will get a picture of our approach to mission at Westminster. And, just as importantly, you will hear from our Minister for Mission, Heather Colletto. You don't want to miss the piece that she has written. But before you read it, I'd like to share a bit of how we ended up with this position on our staff, which Heather is so graciously filling.

The story begins with the fundamental principles related to our mission work at Westminster: long-term relationships; open-ended, mutual partnerships; and face-to-face participation.

Long-term relationships are key to genuine transformation: both of ourselves and of those with whom we partner. Dropping into someone's life for a day or a weekend or even a year sometimes only constitutes a kind of “drive by mission” or “toxic charity” that does more to assuage our conscience than create any enduring benefit for those whose lives we touch. We also hope to keep those long-term, mutual relationships open-ended, so that the work can be led in new and creative directions—by either our partners or by us. That way, we might learn better the role we should rightly play. Otherwise, we too easily maintain a rigid and condescending posture that can't learn from others.

These principles have always contributed to our vision for mission. Then, during our last vision-mission process in 2010, an important, new insight emerged. Our conversations led us to see that, although our financial patronage of outreach organizations was important, it was not as critical as our showing up face-to-face. The sense we clearly got was that, if we were to provide as many human hours of presence as dollars in Heartside and the rest of the city, we would offer a more effective and transforming presence. So, we began to emphasize “participation more than patronage”—a key part of our vision and mission.

Then, miraculously, when we announced the vision statement to the congregation, a couple of our members took in this vision of participation and asked to meet with me. They said that they thought the vision was spot on, and they wanted to help. By the time our conversations were over, they had committed to funding for our Minister for Mission for a five-year period! And, after a search for someone who understood our vision and was committed and able to help us fulfill that vision, by grace, we found Heather Colletto. Her presence among us is a direct outcome of our continued, serious reflection on life-giving mission through Westminster. I urge you to read her article in this issue of Chimes. Great blessings to you all!

Grace and peace,

Rev. Chandler Stokes
The Geography of Mission
and other thoughts on rice, passports, and service

I wasn't exactly sure what serving God looked like, but I was pretty sure it involved stamping a passport and eating rice. Growing up in a large missions church, there was a constant focus on going to and doing for the least of these.

I remember crawling up onto a pew in the church hallway to push buttons on a wooden map of the world. Press the button next to the name of a missionary on the list, and an orange light somewhere around the world would glow to reveal where they were serving. As my knees dug into the scratchy red fabric of that pew, my fingers flying from button to button, orange lights popping up all over the world, I learned that serving God was a geography lesson. (To this day, I can strangely identify Burkina Faso on a map.)

Each summer during Missions Week, the church gymnasium turned into exotic, foreign places: We bartered in a “foreign market” for cheap toys before sitting down on bamboo mats to eat rice as we listened to visiting missionaries share their adventures. I spent school summer breaks on different mission trips to Juarez and, even more exotically, Manhattan.

Add to that adolescence the imagination of a voracious reader and the heart of a millennial. It’s a recipe for a restless mind constantly wandering to far-off lands where I can change the world for Jesus.

By my 23rd birthday, I had moved overseas three times, both to eastern Europe and southeast Asia. I’d sold most of my possessions and filled a tiny storage unit with the rest. My passport pages were filling.

You can imagine my horror, then, sitting again on a bamboo mat eating rice—this time in my home in northern Thailand, living my own adventure—when I realized that I hadn’t magically found the formula for a life pleasing to God. That I still felt discontent, that I wasn’t doing enough. That maybe Missions-with-a-capital-M wasn’t the only way to serve God.

(Re)Define Service

In both Slovakia and Thailand, an unexpected crisis brought us home early, broken (and broke) and disappointed; eventually, unexpected circumstances brought us to the unfamiliar city of Grand Rapids, Michigan. We rolled into town kicking and screaming. And a little angry, to be honest. At ourselves, but also at God.

We were trying to make a difference for you, God! And you keep bringing us back here where there is nothing to do. How are we supposed to impact our world when you won’t let us go there?

The problem was that, through a variety
of factors too detailed (and, in hindsight, beautiful) to name here, God had made it very clear that this is where we were supposed to be. And we weren’t happy about it. Didn’t God know we had work to do?

While we healed and waited for God to really put us to work somewhere meaningful and exciting, I took a job “to pay the bills” in a seminary admissions department. I was on the phone a lot with people. One day, when someone put me on hold, music played. It was a Christian song that began, “God, where you go, I’ll go,” and I immediately cringed, sitting at my desk, feeling useless, clearly not going and doing anything for God.

The next line of that song? “Where you stay, I’ll stay.”

Stay? I immediately hung up the phone and walked outside into the cold air. It was a holy moment for me. The very idea shook me. The Holy Spirit shook me. What if we stayed? What would that mean? What if my little orange light on the map was actually West Michigan? What if my “calling” was not over there, someday, but right here, right now?

Author Jon Acuff writes: “Sometimes, in our attempt to change our lives, we stand at the window, looking out over the horizon...and ignore that the room behind us is already full of people.”

See, the horizon is great because it’s exciting and big. But that room behind me is full of messy people with complicated problems and unclear solutions. It’s intimidating and mundane. Isn’t serving God supposed to be more than that? Isn’t it supposed to be sacred?

I was so busy scouring the horizon for the glow of my little orange light that it never occurred to me to look for it above my own head.

In a 2015 On Being interview with Krista Tippett, Jesuit priest Father Gregory Boyle remarks on the challenges of doing ministry right where we stand, serving in the seemingly mundane daily grind.

“The fear that drives us,” he says, “is that we have to have our sacred in a certain way. It has to be gold-plated and cost of millions and cast of thousands or something.” (If I may project my own metaphor here: a stamped passport feels more sacred than a Michigan’s driver’s license.)

Boyle continues: “So we’ve wrestled the cup out of Jesus’ hand and we’ve replaced it with a chalice because who doesn’t know that a chalice is more sacred than a cup? Never mind that Jesus didn’t use a chalice.”

I realized I was holding a cup, a full cup. No chalice needed. It wasn’t a matter of settling for second best or choosing to be patient and content until God called me to something more. I had to recognize that Jesus simply didn’t use a chalice.

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I started to see how beautiful and Christlike the cup had been all along. I began to realize how I was serving God in my everyday. I recognized the sacred in helping people connect with ministry education, something many had been praying about for years. I saw the sacred in the everyday moments as we walked a family member through a difficult time. I breathed the sacred in allowing myself to heal from a challenging few years. I tasted sacred in getting to know new friends over coffee because I let myself believe we might stay in Grand Rapids. None of that is a shiny chalice. It wasn't even regularly scheduled programming on my calendar. But, friends, it was holy work.

**(Re)write your calendar**

...**Recognizing the Sacred**

A few years ago, Rev. Stokes shared a story to help describe Westminster’s increasing focus on participation. It’s the story of a man who falls into a hole he can’t escape. As he calls for help, a doctor throws down a prescription, a minister throws down a prayer, and a friend throws down...himself. The man in the hole says, “Great. Now, we’re both down here!” And the friend says, “Yeah, but I’ve been here before and I know the way.”

“We don’t want to be the church passing by and throwing a check down in the hole,” Rev. Stokes said. “We’ve been listening to those cries from the hole. It’s time to jump in. It’s not easy. It takes a calendar and a commitment.”

Calendar. Commitment. Scary words indeed in our busy lives. It’s too busy right now, we tell ourselves. We can make a difference “someday.” When I’m done with school. When I get a more flexible job. When the kids are in school. When the kids are done with school. When I’m retired.

But when we’re stuck thinking about how this isn’t the right time in our lives to serve, says Acuff, “we lose sight of the places we’re in with the people we’re in them with. We get distracted and miss out on so many amazing things that are happening all around us. Instead of praying for an adventure, admit you’re already on one and jump into it with both feet.”

Before you think you can’t add one more thing to your calendar, consider that participation may already be on your calendar, disguised as seemingly mundane activities you do on a regular basis to love people well. What’s on your calendar that is more sacred than you realize?

My calendar doesn’t say “Feed and clothe children,” but Rev. Porter reminds me that my evenings of applauding myself for remembering to turn on the slow cooker, talking to Beatrice about her day, changing Gemma’s diaper, and high-fiving my husband when we get them to sleep is sacred. And when they do sleep, I can get out my fancy stationery and write a letter to friends in the mission field because I remember how lonely it can be.

Mark’s calendar says “Coach little league.” It doesn’t say “Volunteer” or “Serve as a positive male role model for young kids,” but that’s exactly what he is doing. His calendar simply says, “Lunch,” but that means an hour eating with the kids at WCDC, many of whom don’t have a father.
figure in their home.

Patti's calendar is filled with her full-time job at the YWCA, serving victims of domestic and sexual violence. Her calendar doesn't say “Go to work” or “Make life-changing difference in lives of strangers experiencing trauma,” but it might as well.

...While Jumping in the Hole

But a lot of the people I have the privilege to meet with tell me they know it's time for them to jump in the hole with someone, to climb out together.

But, as Rev. Stokes preached, “The world's not yet sane; the need is still deep and great.” Realizing how many holes there are to jump into can be overwhelming. Where to even begin? It would be an honor to talk with you about your skills and passions and availability to help identify opportunities to serve. You've got a unique skillset that no one else has. I really believe that. You know the way out of a hole like no one else, so let's jump in together.

“In standing close to the disenfranchised, the outcast, we go where Jesus would go, we stand where Jesus stood, and the Gospel becomes more real and more joyful,” says Rev. Stokes. “But standing where he stood, you feel the rumbling more clearly and hear that good news getting louder—there is no greater joy this side of heaven.”

To say “yes” to intentional participation is to accept an invitation to one of the greatest joys this side of heaven.

Claudine, Joel, Cheryl and others said yes to regularly greeting members and stocking shelves at the Community Food Club. Dick said yes to building tables for Camp Henry. Mamas Heidi and Coreen said “yes” to helping new moms adjust with MomsBloom.

As Father Boyle concluded, “[The Beatitudes’] original language was not ‘Blessed are’ or ‘Happy are’ the single-hearted or those who work for peace or struggle for justice. The more precise translation is ‘You’re in the right place if ...’ It turns out the Beatitudes is not a spirituality. It's a geography. It tells you where to stand. You’re in the right place if you’re over here.”

So, it turns out that serving God is a geography lesson after all. It's just that we've been standing right on top of it all along.

Heather Colletto
Minister for Mission

As Minister for Mission, Heather helps Westminster people serve their city in meaningful ways. She discovers participation opportunities with local organizations, helps represent Westminster in community-wide dialogue, and explores with members how their unique skills and interests can serve the people of Grand Rapids.

With a background in non-profit development, she previously worked in Slovakia and rural Thailand, as well as the nearby YWCA. Heather and her husband, Michael, have two daughters who attend WCDC. They have had Michigan drivers’ licenses since 2009.
Participating in Place
Linking lives in the geography of here

**Take the Next Step**

**Want to get connected?**
If you’d like to get involved but don’t know where to begin, Heather would love to talk to you! “My favorite part of my job is sitting down with Westminster people and learning about what they’re good at, what they’re passionate about, and what sparked their interest in participating,” says Heather. Westminster members with a wide range of experiences and gifts have been connected to opportunities that fit their schedule, interest, and commitment level.

**Already serving?**
We want to know about it! When someone is considering serving with an organization, they jump at the chance to talk with a fellow Westminster member who is already there and knows what it’s like. We understand you want to be humble, but please help us with our inventory of “Where Westminster Serves” by letting us know.

**Looking for support?**
When we link our lives with others, it can be intimidating and a little messy. Serving is a spiritual practice, a journey that is more healthy (and fun!) when we’re on it with others. We’re exploring how we can best support Westminster members as they serve, and we’d love to hear your thoughts. What would help you as you’re linking your life with others? What type of support would help you thrive?

**Mission Committees**

Westminster has four mission committees, and you are invited to join any one of them. Together, we discern the possibilities and the gifts of each other for participating in ministry; indeed, these are the groups that shape the geography of our mission.

**Community Ministries**
We deepen Westminster’s relationships with local organizations (within Kent County) and seek to increase our participation by connecting service opportunities with our members and their unique God-given talents and passions. (Elder Peter Boumgarden – peter.boumgarden@gmail.com)

**Health and Wholeness**
We review the mental and physical health needs within Westminster and our surrounding community to understand where the church might respond. (Rev. Jen Porter – jenp@wpcgr.org)

**Justice and Peace**
We educate ourselves on justice, peace, and poverty, and then seek to call people to act. (Moderator Dave Petroelje – davepetroelje@gmail.com)

**Worldwide Ministries**
We explore ways to deepen our relationships and participation outside of Kent County, including with partners First Presbyterian Church in Benton Harbor, Michigan, and First Hand Aid in Cuba. (Elder Linda Paul – lbpaul1961@yahoo.com)
Westminster Presbyterian Church

Chimes

Tom having lunch with WCDC kids.

Marilyn and Pia filling neighbors’ pantry orders.

Cheryl at the Community Food Club check out.

Westminster crew building tables for the CH Dining Hall.

Participating in Place Linking lives in the geography of here
Camp Henry Forest Management

Volunteerism, stewardship, and mission

Since 1996, Camp Henry has been actively managing natural resources in accordance with a state-approved plan. This improves and sustains resource quality and productivity and, it has enhanced the camp’s environmental education programs.

In 1997, sale of harvested hardwood trees provided the seed money to embark on several other resource management projects—the Halstead Wetland Trail boardwalk and observation deck; a wetland-wildlife impoundment and dugout pond; a fenced wildlife travel corridor, which divides the north and south horse pastures; and a hiking/cross-country ski trail along the eastern perimeter of the property.

Additional projects have included many educational sign postings, numerous tree and shrub plantings, and several wildlife nest-box installations. Most recently, an arborist came to evaluate all of the trees in the high ropes course area—to help us make sure that our trees are healthy and happy and strong—and to help us to make sure that when utilizing them for the high ropes course that we do so in a way that help maintain and protect the health of our trees.

The program practices include thinning to secure optimum growth and saw-log production in the red pine stands in the western portion of DeVries Woods. This provides small saw-logs for fence posts, etc.; it also promotes rapid growth among the remaining straight-form trees. Ultimately (at 80-100 years), these trees will be valued for log home logs and telephone poles.

Additionally, timber stand improvement and clear-cutting to regenerate aspen have been used. Aspen regeneration is an important wildlife management tool as well. It also furnishes dense, young forest habitats for deer, grouse, and woodcock.

Camp Henry seeks to be a good steward of the land that its benefactors have so generously given. More importantly, camp’s responsible land stewardship honors God the Creator.
Black Lives Matter
Participation through conversations

Prompted by our Justice and Peace Committee, the Session invites us all to take the opportunity provided by the “Black Lives Matter” (BLM) movement to engage each other and our neighbors in conversations about race—to listen, to speak up, to act.

When I asked a friend about “Black Lives Matter,” he wanted to focus the discussion on the impact of lead tainted water and poisoning from old house paint and dust on communities of color. Another friend suggested the basic discussion is about white privilege. Amy and Doug both had more difficult interactions with neighbors, one of whom assumed that because he placed a BLM sign, Doug would support her advocacy for another cause.

Sonja tells me that she used a sign and wrist bands to prompt conversation in her classroom: “I started asking each student if their black, Latino, or white life mattered today or, ‘How are you going to make your life matter today?’ I have gotten great responses. Students who didn’t care are now turning the corner. Two students shared stories with me about incarcerated parents. Another shared a story about walking to America from Guatemala at the age of seven without his parents.”

The Justice and Peace Committee would like to hear about your conversations. Please send them to Moderator Dave Petroelje (davepetroelje@gmail.com) or Heather Colletto, Minister for Mission (heatherc@wpcgr.org) And, look for the WPC Facebook Group that will be available soon. For more information visit westminstergr.org/blacklivesmatter.

Rev. David Baak,
Executive Pastor for Communication and Administration
Linking our lives to meaningfully connect and help each other through open ended, long-term relationships.