

## March 2016 Newsletter

### SUE'S STORY: My Journey within the Presbyterian Church

We all have our stories and the older we are the more stories we have. This is my story of my journey with the Presbyterian Church, especially in the past 20 years.

I was baptized at Beechview United Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh PA. This is the church where my parents met, where all of my grandparents attended, and two of my grandparents served as elders. So I could be called Presbyterian even before I was born. When our family moved from Pittsburgh, we joined Maplewood United Presbyterian Church in what was, at that time, the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. My family actively served in my home church—both of my parents were ordained elders. Out of college, in 1979 I moved to Virginia and joined the Falls Church Presbyterian Church. In 1983 the northern and southern Presbyterian churches were reunited into the PCUSA, the denomination that we are in today. And in 1985 Brian and I joined Neelsville Presbyterian Church.

I was first ordained and served as a Deacon in my teens, and also served on Neelsville's Deacon Board. Shortly after that, I was ordained to the Board of Elders and have served as a ruling elder for three terms to date. It was at Neelsville over the past 30 years that I grew greatly in my faith and biblical understanding. I have been blessed to belong to the Friday Morning Women's Bible Study since 1986, after my eldest son was born. It has been my joy to serve as Deacon, Elder, Sunday School teacher, global missions chair, and other ministries when called. And my involvement has kept me informed of greater denominational issues that have been a source of frustration throughout recent years.

As society wrestles with the social issues of the day, so does the church. Neelsville church has always been consistent in its responses to theological and social issues addressed by our church. So many prayers, so many concerns, so much grief for our national church but balanced by joy and ministry in our local church.

Have you heard of the five stages of grief? I believe that I have been grieving the loss of the Presbyterian church in which I grew up. I have been in *Denial*, that our changing society would influence the church instead of the church influencing society. This led me to *Anger* at those within the national church that continually espoused doctrine inconsistent with the Biblical teachings and the Confessions of our church. This changed to *Depression*, with the continuing salvos against historical biblical based teachings. *Bargaining* with God was next—bargaining through prayer, asking and pleading for Him to uphold His church and to recall all the good done through Presbyterian churches, missionaries, and hospitals as I watched more and more churches leave to other Presbyterian denominations. Finally *Acceptance* of the direction the church was headed. The Presbyterian Church (USA) has vastly shifted in beliefs, in the understanding of who God and Jesus Christ are. Although many of the denomination's members were still working and believing as they always did, the votes nationally enabled this shift.

But my story does not end here. In 2011, while on Session, I first heard of the beginnings of an organized movement of Presbyterian churches and presbyteries that were also feeling frustrated with and marginalized by the national church body's beliefs and actions. A group of pastors from some of the largest PCUSA churches around the country called a meeting. This

newly organized group birthed the Fellowship of Presbyterians, a traditional body of believers within the PCUSA, and was also working on a new Presbyterian denomination that wasn't shackled by the shifting PCUSA theology. In 2012 and 2014, I decided to attend the meetings of the Fellowship of Presbyterians and the new denomination, ECO: the Covenant order of Evangelical Presbyterians, to better understand them, their beliefs and their plans. At these meetings I heard from, worshiped with, and met with church leaders of vision for a traditional, bible-based Presbyterianism. No acrimony or harsh words, but loving, healthy discussions and plans for the future. A new breath was breathed into Presbyterianism—a new reason for joy that God was indeed in control and doing a new and great thing.

I have pretty much finished grieving the changes within the PUCSA and am hoping that Neelsville will move to a place where we can flourish and grow, and reach more people through another Presbyterian denomination. I know that others in our church have been called to leave our Neelsville church family, but I was impressed by God early on to help lead the church through these times, not to leave it; and not to just ignore our current national body while continuing Neelsville's ministries. No matter what changes may occur, we at Neelsville will continue to welcome all people to our church to grow and become disciples of our Lord; and to love all those who we encounter in this life, within the church and in the world. We are all sinners working out our salvation, being sanctified by the Holy Spirit and relying totally on God's grace. Thank you God!

As I alluded to earlier, many churches and individuals have left or are leaving the PCUSA. Recent PCUSA data I have seen shows losses of about 200 congregations per year (2012-2014). Since ECO's inception in 2012, it has grown to 249 congregations. And the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, established in 1981, now claims over 550 congregations.

So here we are, a body of believers in Jesus Christ, who are grappling with the changes of society that are infiltrating our church. We always will be in conflict with the world, but as we are called to be in the world but not of the world, we may need to move on to remain obedient. Some of you may be somewhere along the path of grief that I have trod—denial, anger, depression, bargaining, acceptance. But I implore you to keep your eye on God and ask for His guidance. I believe He still has great things in store for His people in Germantown and throughout the world, and He wants to use us in His plan.

Joyfully Serving,

Sue Farrell

Member of Neelsville's Discipleship and Discernment Team