

New Horizons

LIFE IN "THE DAKOTAS" IN THE EARLY 1970S: MY OLD PRESBYTERY

John W. Mahaffy

The Presbytery of the Dakotas was not my chosen destination when I graduated from Westminster Seminary in 1970. I took a position as summer supply at Grace OPC in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and the congregation extended a call before the end of the summer. In those days, the Presbytery of the Dakotas extended from the Canadian to the Mexican border, and from the eastern borders of North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas, to the western borders of Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico.

The Presbytery gave rigorous theological examinations to candidates, but was willing to evaluate their views in the light of Scripture, not simply tradition. They even approved the examination of a young licentiate who came out of seminary with the notion that union with Christ was a central concept in understanding the order of salvation! Theology was taken seriously, but was not an abstract exercise. It came to life in the regional church, particularly in the weeklong youth camps (at which every pastor was expected to be present) and the family camps.

I soon discovered that the Presbytery was a great place to cut one's ecclesiastical and theological teeth. At each stated meeting, the Presbytery elected a temporary clerk to assist the stated clerk, who was Jack Peterson, who served the three small congregations in Bismarck, Lark, and Leith, North Dakota. I was elected at the first stated meeting after my ordination, and found that my job was to take minutes of the meeting and give them to Mr. Peterson. Exceedingly valuable were the lessons learned as Jack quietly explained why procedures were followed, what principles of church government were at stake, and some of the finer points of theology. I remember Jack, off the floor, telling the late Rev. Ben Male that he (Ben) was the outstanding theologian of the Presbytery.

Although I served as temporary clerk for only about half of the meetings during my seven years in the Presbytery, I was known as "the permanent temporary clerk." I would scribble minutes in my personal shorthand, go home after the meeting, and spend a couple of days transcribing them into something typed, which I sent to the clerk. Jack would edit and retype them onto the "purple plague" spirit duplicating masters, and then mail copies to ministers and sessions.

Stated meetings began on Tuesday (Monday was for driving), and lasted into Thursday, with Friday for the drive home. The Presbytery repeatedly discussed dividing, but always voted against it while I was there. Had a proposal to divide come to the floor on Tuesday, after the long day of travel, it might have passed. However, by the time it came up on Wednesday or Thursday, the rich sense of fellowship was a strong factor opposing division.

I remember a few ministers standing around during a recess, when Jack Peterson remarked, "Have you noticed that the ministers with all the advice on rearing children are the ones without children or with little babies?" I don't know if the remark was aimed at me (I was the youngest in the group), but the counsel has been remembered!

The only stated meeting of a presbytery that I have missed since my ordination began the day after my oldest son, David, was born. Two years later, the Presbytery met in Oklahoma City, only 100 miles away (very close by Presbytery of the Dakotas standards), so my wife drove over for the day with David. As we

recessed for lunch, Jack Peterson sought the floor and stated that the reason for my absence two years earlier was now present. He led the Presbytery in singing "Happy Birthday" to David. Some thirty years later, when David as a ruling elder was elected temporary clerk of the Presbytery of the Southwest, Jack Peterson made sure he got a picture of him serving in that capacity.

The author is pastor of Trinity OPC in Newberg, Ore. New Horizons, April 2011.

[Return to Formatted Page](#)

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