

2018 Churchwide Gathering of Presbyterian Women
Susan Jackson Dowd
August 5, 2018 Morning Plenary

Timeless: The PW Effect

Good morning, Presbyterian Women and men. Have you had a great Gathering? Let me say again, I am so glad y'all came.

So, how is it already Sunday? More than two years of planning has brought us to this final plenary moment, and in a few hours the Galt House will be somewhat quieter. I think the staff will miss our PW buzz, don't you? The exhibit hall has already disappeared, the bookstore has been packed up, most of you have packed your bags. In a few hours, our amazing backdrop (thank you, Darci McKinnon, for sharing with us your incomparable artistic gifts) will be carefully packed for storage, and our banners will be boxed. This PW Gathering will join the 10 that came before in our memories and our PW histories. I will add Mary Martin to our list of Gathering chairs. Thank you again, Mary, for volunteering to take on the monumental task of organizing a churchwide Gathering. We are grateful.

We have spent several days celebrating the last 30 years of 230. And now, this moment is passing. But the impact of this moment will live in us and with us. We are transformed. The Holy Spirit has done that. And as we move from this community—that's what we have here—an inclusive, caring community of women that strengthens the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and witnesses to the promise of God's kingdom—something happens. This Gathering community will grow. The changes in us and the stories we tell will touch others and draw them in. There is an ancient question that asks, we know one and one is two, but what does the "and" mean? The "and" is relationship, the heart of the equation that pulls the ones, the individuals, together. This is PW—our relationships, our community. We are somewhere in the "and." So, we will continue to build community, even though we are preparing to move in many different directions.

The Butterfly Effect

How many of you have heard of the butterfly effect? This concept was studied by Edward Lorenz, a scientist and a chaostician—I rather like this. I felt like a chaostician in the weeks leading up to the Business Meeting and Gathering. I felt a little like one last night during installation! If you have seen *Jurassic Park*, Jeff Goldblum plays a chaostician, Ian Malcolm, who asks a lot of questions about how bringing the dinosaurs back is going to work out for us.

Chaosticians work on something called chaos theory. Chaos theory says—in a very simplified "Susan's not a scientist but likes these concepts" kind of way—random acts (chaos) are not so random. Random acts, over time, create patterns that can be ultimately observed and understood. Much of creation is like this.

Lorenz, while studying chaos back in the 1950s, began to note something he called the Butterfly Effect. This is a phenomenon that shows a tiny local change in a complex system can have a large impact elsewhere. When a butterfly flaps its wings, ripples are put in motion that can result in a hurricane half way a world away. Have you heard of this, the Butterfly Effect? So, small changes and actions can have large consequences in unpredictable places, and cause unknown impact.

The PW Effect

Presbyterian Women have strengthened the Presbyterian Church for as long as there have been Presbyterian churches, whether here in the U.S. or in Switzerland, or Scotland. That's what we do. This is our history—which we have observed in our *Glimpses of Time* videos during the Gathering. Where there have been faith communities, there have been women making them so. Women have always strengthened the church, and we always will. 30 and 230 mark moments in this past and present.

Not all of our history and present reality is observable, and our future is not predictable. We *can* predict that God is faithful and has promised to be with us through what may look like chaos or randomness, but will make sense to someone, somewhere, over time. We cannot know.

We cannot fathom the full impact that our work has done historically, is doing now, and will do in the future. We can study our history, we should celebrate moments and markers, but we should study and celebrate with an understanding that God's work is not bounded by time. PW's mission and ministry are timeless. If Presbyterian Women as individuals and as an organization somehow disappeared today—we were removed from this world to a different place, Ezekiel style, the impact would not also disappear. Transformations caused by Presbyterian women's prayers and actions would continue to create positive change because what we have set in motion is boundless, infinite, and eternal.

I like the example of the Fellowship of the Least Coin. When a Presbyterian Woman prays for peace and reconciliation, and leaves a penny as a token of her prayer, someone she will never know benefits from a project for women and children that helps her earn income that pays school fees for her daughters who learn to read. Their lives turn not on a dime, but on a penny, a least coin, and a heartfelt prayer. The woman and her daughters gain power through economic independence, and the status of women in their village/town/city begins to improve, and the ripples continue—an infinite range of possibilities and impacts. The butterfly, the Presbyterian woman, has flapped her wings, and the world has changed. **There has been a PW Effect.**

The PW Effect: small prayers and faithful actions of a Presbyterian women at First Presbyterian Church in Midwest USA change the lives of women they will never know. Circumstances are altered across town or across the world, and lives are changed in a continuous cycle of blessing.

When we nurture faith through prayer and Bible study we deepen our capacity to do God's work in the world. We find the inspiration and the strength to do what we are called to do. The process of transformation for us and for others finds a starting point.

When we support the mission of the church worldwide we are broadening our reach still further, touching more situations, more individuals.

When we work for justice and peace, our prayers and actions begin to shift systems of marginalization and oppression. These shifts ultimately impact life experiences in people and places we cannot predict. Even the smallest action, the flap of a wing, can push systems toward positive change. An old Greek proverb says that society grows great when we plant trees whose shade will never benefit us.

When we build inclusive, caring communities, we add seats to tables, join tables when invited, and widen circles. When we live the PW Purpose, we set the PW Effect in motion.

A Word about Women's Organizations

I hope our time together has affirmed or reaffirmed for you that Presbyterian women are still needed. We are needed not just as individual Presbyterian women, but as a faith-based women's organization. I hope that you have a deeper understanding that, against what culture is telling us, now is **not** the time to accept that the days of faith-based women's organization are passing, that women have arrived, and that we will be OK without our connectional network—the "and" in the one and one equation.

Women in cultures all around the world continue to be marginalized or sit on the brink of marginalization. The line is very thin, including here in the United States. Women in various demographics in the US face myriad forms of marginalization and oppression—there are no exceptions. Women's circumstances continue to depend on what the power base in the culture will yield. A political or governance change can cause women, who were professional, working women one day, to be confined to their homes and limited in their opportunities the next. This has been recent reality for some. Women's gains are often based on what the power dynamic will allow. We have watched the #MeToo movement erupt across the United States. We know that violence against women knows no demographic, and is a deep and imbedded part of the world's cultures. So, women's faith-based organizations and networks matter—we are stronger together than we are individually. In a culture of "rugged individualism" women must guard against being lulled into believing that the strength of our networks is not needed. We are stronger when we rely on the "and" that connects us.

I believe in the PW Effect. I believe God calls me to large and small acts of faith. But mostly small. I believe that my small, prayerful acts can make a difference that I cannot calculate or anticipate. That these acts are the seedlings of a tree that will shade a future generation. So, I look for dropped and lost pennies. I don't pass them by when I see them on the street or when I find them languishing under a piece of furniture moved for dusting. Because of the vision of Shanti Solomon, we understand that a penny, a least coin, is not a throw-away, but a token of

empowerment. The least coin is a reminder to exercise what God has empowered us to do: pray. When I find pennies, I believe God is calling me to pause amid my busyness, to pray, and to consider prayerful action. God is calling me, is calling you, to flap our wings, and to change the world.

Traveling mercies to you all. Amen.

Susan Jackson Dowd is Presbyterian Women's executive director. She delivered this keynote during the 2018 Churchwide Gathering of Presbyterian Women, held in Louisville, Kentucky, August 2-5.