



We Meet, Therefore We Are

By Charlotte Johnstone

When Grace Weisner convened Forbearance's Membership Committee last week, the agenda concerned Rev. Hustisford's desire to better educate new members as to how a Presbyterian church operates. "How do we make decisions here?" she asked them. "How does change come about? How do we handle congregational disagreements? In other words, what's our corporate culture?"

After a few moments of silence, Jack Branigan said, "We meet, therefore we are."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Grace asked.

"It means," Jack said, "that Presbyterianism is a bunch of meetings interrupted once a week by a worship service. It means that we like to talk. It means that two weeks ago I sat in a deacons' meeting for three hours while my fellow Presbyterians tried to figure out a way to tell Curly Rumbaugh that our 'corporate culture' wasn't going to allow him to wear his red plaid golf pants when he ushers on Sunday mornings any longer."

"That's because we're tidy," said Lois Borman.

"Tidy?" Jack said. "I'm not tidy—just ask my wife."

"Well, 'tidy' is the word that comes to mind," Lois told him. "We're the 'decently and in order' people. Whenever we have a problem in the church, we don't go off like a loose cannon—we form a committee and, if necessary, we form subcommittees. Committees are tidy. If someone is in a lather about something at Forbearance, all you have to do is say that a committee's looking into it and you're halfway home to solving the problem. Committees are like sinkholes—stuff can get buried in there for years. In fact, I've seen committees use whole sessions just debating about how to proceed—kind of a tedious slow death as far as solving anything is concerned. I mean, we don't have bishops, we have committees."

"And how come Presbyterians always seem to sit in a circle?" asked Betty Chandler. "Ever notice that? Last week at a meeting in my home, people dragged chairs in from the dining room just so they could sit in a circle. I had everything set up in the living room and they rearranged the whole thing."

"That's because we like to keep an eye on each other," Jack said.

"We do?" asked Grace.

"Yeah, we do," Jack said. "Presbyterians tend to be polite—"

we usually don't rant and rave in public—so, in meetings, we like to watch each other for clues for what isn't being said. That's probably why some committee meetings take so long—no one wants to upset anyone, so we use four times as many words as we need. If we weren't so polite, we'd just say, 'That suggestion of yours is totally boneheaded and I, for one, think you're nuts.' Instead, Presbyterians say things like 'Your suggestion is certainly interesting and deserves full consideration of the committee, but I would like to offer an additional thought that, while not in direct opposition to your contribution, could, perhaps, be considered as an alternative.' That's Presbyterian for 'You're nuts.'"

"Well, structure is civilized, Jack," Grace said. "And we always get the job done, don't we?"

"Sure we do," Jack replied, "but sometimes it seems like it takes forever. Look at last summer's picnic. I was on the steering committee for that thing and we must have had 10 subcommittees—food, drinks, games, prizes, transportation and a whole ton of other things. We even had a Porta-Potty subcommittee, which, by the way, no one wanted to be on. I wouldn't be surprised if we had a subcommittee assigned to petition God for good weather. I mean, Presbyterians are constitutionally unable to leave anything to chance."

"Do you remember some years ago when the church changed its worship hour from 11 AM to 10 AM?" Betty asked. "If we'd had a bishop or someone like that, maybe the change would have just been decreed. But we're Presbyterians, so a position paper was prepared by the worship committee, listing all the reasons why the Sunday schedule would be enhanced by the new hour, we had a bunch of small group meetings, we polled the congregation for a month, collated all the data, had two separate committee meetings and finally a congregational meeting to take a vote. It took us six months to change one hour, but everyone had a say in the decision and even the ones who didn't like it eventually came around to the majority vote. That's the way a democracy works and Presbyterian polity is nothing if not democratic. We may not leave much to chance and we certainly can be accused of being reluctant about change, but we eventually get to where we need to go."

"Are you saying that Presbyterians are congenitally unable to be spontaneous?" Grace asked.

"Oh, as individuals we're perfectly capable of being spontaneous," Betty said. "But as a corporate body, we tend to think a long time before we leap, if you know what I mean."

"Especially if it involves money," said Jack.

"Or the possibility that a number of folks are going to be upset," Lois added.

"Let's face it," said Betty, "we don't like being told—we like being consulted. After all, our denomination was born in rebellion against a single centralized authority, so maybe it's natural that we value consensus over edict. Or, now that I think of it, maybe the Presbyterian method of atoning for sins is to assign everyone to endless committees—sort of our own version of purgatory."

"Yeah," said Jack, "Presbyterian hell is a tie vote in a committee with a chairperson who is incapable of moving the agenda without dithering around until everyone lapses into a coma. Listen, if Moses had tried to lead Presbyterians through the wilderness, we would have tabled the motion for a year while we conducted feasibility studies on feeding logistics, shelter needs, alternative modes of transportation for nonwalkers, child care, long-term financing, continuing education, clothing requirements and provisions for liquid intake. The picnic people would have reactivated the Porta-Potty subcommittee. Moses would have had to meet with the Long-range Planning Committee and the session would have required at least three letters of reference as to his reliability in wilderness-wandering. And, because we're Presbyterians, a vague term like 'wandering' would have sounded alarming—we would have demanded detailed maps and even, perhaps, prepaid reservations at suitable oases along the way."

And with that, they called it a night. On the way to his car, Jack ran into Rev. Hustisford, who warned him that the Building and Grounds Committee meeting the next evening might run a bit long. "The subcommittee dealing with the boiler problem has done a lot of research and they've prepared a lengthy list of options to be considered by the full committee. I suspect that it will wreck your agenda, but I've got to hand it to them—they've really been thorough."

"Well, of course they have," Jack sighed. "They're Presbyterians, so of course they have."

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