

Portions of Hope: Lessons from the Lead Presbyter

Road trips are an iconic American experience. From images of the wood (or faux wood) paneled station wagon packed to the brim with suitcases, coolers, and snacks – perhaps with a car top carrier from Sears and Roebuck to an early Dodge minivan also packed with suitcases, coolers, and snacks to a SUV packed with suitcases, coolers, and snacks but with the luxury of video screened entertainment systems, many of us remember the road trips of our childhood. The most iconic question of all road trips, whether it comes five minutes or five hours from home, is are we there yet? In many ways, the Presbytery of West Virginia’s “trip” from where we have been to the mission and ministry to which God is calling us could be termed God’s great road trip. I am fairly certain that we started asking God, are we there yet, almost as soon as we started. At the Presbytery meeting on Saturday, I shared the following.

Presbytery of West Virginia, we are here! The journey has been long. In August of 2020, the Leadership Team reported to the Presbytery that a Financial Sustainability Task Force had been created in response to the Stewardship Committee’s concerns that the Presbytery was drawing on its investments at a level that was inconsistent with best financial practices. In August of 2021, this task force reported its findings which focused on three areas: the cost of owning and maintaining a brick-and-mortar office in South Charleston, the need to control staffing costs – especially the cost of medical insurance, and the need to explore the cost of maintaining and supporting Bluestone Camp and Retreat.

The findings of the task force led to the Presbytery approving the sale of the office building in South Charleston in May of 2022. It also led to a decision to implement a five-year phase out of family medical coverage, moving to cover the cost of medical coverage for Presbytery employees only.

The conclusions of this group also led to the appointment of the Bluestone Working Group in 2021. At the Presbytery meeting on May 15, 2025, the report of the Bluestone Working Group and its recommendations were adopted. Bluestone Camp and Retreat will transition to an independent entity

supporting the greater West Virginia community. This decision by the Presbytery marked the beginning of a new chapter in Bluestone's ministry. The Bluestone Transitional Board begins its work in the next 30 days.

The work of the Financial Stability Task Force helped the Presbytery to seek to be a more financially stable Presbytery; work that continues as the Commission on Operations begins its work.

While the work and implementation of the Financial Sustainability Task Force moved forward, the Leadership Team of the Presbytery began to ask the question, what's next for the ministry and mission of the Presbytery? By the end of 2022, it was clear that God was leading the Leadership Team to guide the Presbytery in a formal time of self-reflection. In January 2023, Ruling Elder Tom Haywood of Bream Memorial Presbyterian Church who is a lawyer, a consultant, and a leader who seeks to help people solve problems, met with the Leadership Team to determine how to engage in the needed Presbytery self-reflection, seeking to answer who would lead the process. This important work led the Presbytery to engage the services of Holy Cow! Consulting guided by Emily Swanson who joined the Presbytery for its meeting in August 2023.

Members of the Presbytery were invited to offer input about the Presbytery, its mission and ministry, and God's direction using the Landscape Survey tool. The results of the survey and multiple meetings between Ms. Swanson and the Leadership Team led to the development and presentation of a Strategic Plan for the Presbytery, adopted by the Presbytery in November of 2024. The key areas of focus identified in the plan are relationships, resources (for congregations and leaders), and leadership development. The plan called for a new committee structure and a new staffing model.

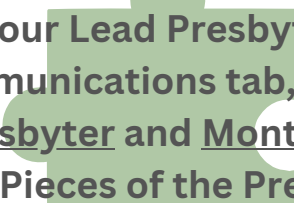
For those of you who have followed my reflections in earlier newsletters and as I shared at the August 2025 Presbytery meeting, you may remember these words – on paper the implementation is orderly. In reality, the plan requires polishing, trial and error. In reality, the implementation is messy. The timeline, noted as aspirational when it was approved, was adjusted. The new committee structure originally targeted to start in September 2025 would begin in

January 2026. On paper, a new staffing structure is smooth, without twists or turns. In reality, searching for the staff that God is calling to lead us is untidy. Our timeline is not God's timeline.

Presbytery of West Virginia, we are here! It is a bittersweet moment. Moving into the space to which God is calling us means loss – we no longer have a “presbytery office”, Bluestone is moving toward independence, committees and programs have changed, the staff has changed and shifted – during this process we have said goodbye to Ed Thompson, Amy Robinson, and on Saturday, Susan Sharp Campbell. Saying goodbye to what was means naming our loss and grief.

Presbytery of West Virginia, we are here! We have new priorities, new committees, and a newly elected Connectional Presbyter, Sarah Sanderson-Doughty. God has called us to a new place. God is asking us to look toward what is new, what is possible for the Presbytery of West Virginia in 2026 and beyond.

Presbytery of West Virginia, we are here! I am excited to discover what God will do next as we build and rebuild relationships and community between the Presbytery and its churches, between the Presbytery and the people in the pews of its churches and their pastoral leaders, between churches, between people, between leaders. I am energized by all the ways in which the Presbytery of West Virginia can resource its congregations and the people of the Presbytery. What will leadership development look like for the Presbytery we are becoming? God is doing a new thing. This gives me hope. Presbytery of West Virginia, we are here! We are a Presbytery of hope.



To easily find remarks from our Lead Presbyter and Moderator, please visit our website, select the communications tab, and tabs for Portions of Hope: Lessons from the Lead Presbyter and Monthly Mod Musing are available under Pieces of the Presbytery.