

The First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu  
Written for the May 31, 2011 Presbytery Conversation  
By Clark Cowden

In January of 2011, the Presbytery of the Pacific had a regular stated presbytery meeting, where they voted on a new Way Forward proposal. Rev. Dan Chun, and some of the pastors and staff at the First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu, had worked very hard to develop this proposal for the presbytery. There are a number of issues that have divided that presbytery and made it hard to really be a presbytery together. The Honolulu staff had invested a lot of time and energy in this proposal, hoping this would give them some hope for moving forward together. After some discussion, the presbytery voted down the proposal 81-83. This was very discouraging for Dan, his pastors, and his staff. They wondered how and if the presbytery could continue to function together. The Rev. Jerry Andrews of the First Presbyterian Church of San Diego called Dan and asked him if he had considered transferring to the Presbytery of San Diego. He had not, but started to at that point. He also started considering transferring to the Presbytery of Santa Barbara, as well as possibly moving to the EPC.

Dan Chun contacted Clark Cowden in March to ask about this possibility. A few phone calls and emails were exchanged to share basic information. Clark was not sure how serious this was or if this would really go anywhere.

On Tuesday, April 5, Dan met with his elders, and they decided they would like to invite a couple of people from San Diego to come and talk with them, to see if we might be a good fit for each other. Dan called Clark on Wednesday, April 6, and made this request. Dan Chun also informed his Executive Presbyter, Linda Culbertson, at this time. Clark also talked to Linda, as well as Doska Ross, our brand new synod exec/clerk.

On Thursday, April 14, Clark gathered a group of people together to begin discussing the Next Wave options for our presbytery. Clark informed them that the Glenkirk Presbyterian Church session in Glendora had voted to transfer to our presbytery, and that the First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu was also thinking about it. Clark told them that Bob Davis and Mike McClenahan would be travelling with him to Honolulu the next week to explore this possibility. The group asked for a report back afterwards.

On Monday, April 18, Ron Mathieu, the church's executive director, and the Rev. Drew Hulse, the associate pastor for youth, offered to play nine holes of golf with Clark and Mike at the church golf course. While the golf was fun, the real benefit was the conversation, building relationships, and getting to know each other. When we were done, we got a quick tour of their building, which is operated by three groups: the church, the golf course, and the catering/banquet business. It was totally amazing and very impressive. It is very unique. It is an incredible facility and a beautiful location. Bob arrived later that evening.

On Tuesday, April 19, Clark, Bob, and Mike arrived at the church at 10:30 am to meet with Dan and his staff. We had a great time sharing with them about our presbytery and answering their questions. There were probably about a dozen of their staff present. After that, we had lunch

with Dan and about 4 others of his staff. We continued to talk about our presbytery, their church, and what a possible relationship might look like.

After lunch, Ron, the Executive Director, gave us a tour of the building. We continued to be amazed at all of the space they have to work in and how they are putting it to such good use. They do an amazing dance, sharing it with two other organizations, helping each other out, for the good of all three. The quote of the day was when Ron was telling us about some of the remodeling they had to do after they moved in and he said, "We decided we didn't need two loading docks." The church has many walls that are covered with hundreds of pictures of children that their members sponsor through Compassion International. They also have a display commemorating their history, which includes a picture of the Carpathia. The Carpathia was the ship that went to rescue people from the sinking Titanic. They have used that image that their congregation is like the Carpathia. They believe God has sent them into the world to save people whose lives have crashed and now are sinking.

After that, Ron showed us the powerpoint presentation of the miracle of how they came to buy the building. It is truly an amazing, inspiring, story of faith. It really touched our hearts and moved us emotionally. The kind of risks they had to take, the kind of faith they had to exercise, the way they had to trust God for the money and all of the difficult choices they had to make, were nothing short of a miracle. They endured hardships, the loss of members, the loss of friendships, and insurmountable obstacles. They overcame impossible barriers in a way that only God could have accomplished. The church ended up moving out of Honolulu, across a mountain, to the other side of the island. But, as they describe it, they did not move the church, God moved the mountain.

Walking away from the church that afternoon, the three of us could not help but be amazed at what an amazing story of faith they have lived. Their staff are quality people. They are doing innovative and creative ministries. They are stretching themselves to trust God and step out in faith, the way many people talk about, but many seldom do. God is clearly at work in this place.

We had a break for a couple of hours in the late afternoon and then we returned to the church at 5:30 pm to have dinner with the elders. They have 25 elders on their session and all of their staff attend, as well. We had a good time in conversation. We learned that they had just received 52 new members and had 22 baptisms! It was so incredible. They had the three of us introduce ourselves, Dan asked us questions about our presbytery, and we answered questions from the elders. We were amazed that many of the elders had already read some of our documents on our presbytery website. Dan said he would call us later that evening after the meeting and let us know what, if anything, the session had decided.

Later that evening, Dan called and said that the session had voted unanimously to transfer to the Presbytery of San Diego. Dan did not think they would be ready to vote so soon, but they were. He said they liked our presentation, our authenticity, and our vision for the future. He said they felt a real synergy with us and were looking forward to joining with us, if our presbytery would have them. We had a final conversation the next morning before flying back. We emphasized that their transfer would have to be a whole presbytery decision, that the three of us did not speak for the presbytery, and that we would need to time to discern together how God was leading us.