

Sermon for Sunday, June 20, 1976, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"THE CHURCH AND HOW SHE FARES"

I Timothy 4:1-16

"Take heed to yourself and to your teaching: hold to that, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers." --I Timothy 4:16

This morning I want to share with you some things about our denomination as a result of the 116th meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U. S. Our visitors this morning may not find this very interesting; however, what has been happening in our denomination, sometimes called the Southern Presbyterian Church, is also happening to every main-line denomination in America. So, what I say is generally applicable to most of the churches in America. At the same time, some of you who are members of our denomination may not be particularly interested in what is going on at the denominational level. I hope that is not so, because ultimately what happens at the denominational level filters down to touch your life in some way. Also, you and I are not Christians in isolation. As Presbyterians, we belong to that great body of believers who hold to the Reformed faith in the Presbyterian order. We belong to a large family of Christians. So, what effects the larger body effects us as a congregation and as individuals.

This morning I want to deal with the recent history of our denomination and bring you up to date as I do every year. Some things began to happen back in the 1960s that have brought us to a crisis point in the life of our church. The present crisis in our denomination is highlighted by the fact that at our national office in Atlanta we have had to dismiss personnel who had only recently been hired. There simply was not enough money to pay the salaries. It is highlighted by the fact that our finances have declined at the national level to the extent that we are now bringing home missionaries simply because we do not have the funds to keep them on the field. The crisis is again highlighted by the fact that the membership of our denomination is dropping. In the United Presbyterian Church, or the Northern Presbyterian Church as it is sometimes called, in the past several years, their membership has declined by more than \$600,000 members. Our loss has been minimal compared to that, but the fact remains that we have not grown in a time when the population of the country as a whole is growing and in a time when the population in the South in particular is simply exploding and increasing dramatically as people are moving into the southern states where our denomination is principally located. The question is, "Why?" Why have all these things happened? What is the basis of the crisis that faces us as a denomination? I would like to share with you my opinion as to why some of these things have occurred.

In the mid-fifties, certain things began to happen in our country. I suppose we could pinpoint it in time with the 1954 Supreme Court decision concerning segregation. With the breakdown of the southern segregation laws, the social structures of our country were thrown into confusion and turmoil. Personally, I believe, as I hope all of you do, that the Supreme Court was right. And while I have not always agreed with the ways in which their decision has been implemented, I think we have to acknowledge that great strides have been made in righting many injustices in our nation. I hope none of us would want to return to those days in which minorities in our country were grossly oppressed. However, in the church, this event was the signal for many whose primary interest was social action to come forward. By the early 1960s, many of our young ministers coming out of the seminaries had been

grounded and trained in the so-called "social" gospel; and as they came out of the seminary their primary interest was not in the historic mission of the church, on evangelism and church growth, but their focus and their energies were centered on changing the structures of what they considered to be an injustice. As a matter of fact, there were those who said that the church no longer had time to evangelize individuals but the church's task was to evangelize the structures of our society. Since this group of churchmen were action-oriented in changing things, in redesigning the world about them, it was only natural that they would also want to change the structure of the institutional church as well. By the late 1960s, this group had gained firm control of our denomination and radical, sweeping changes were beginning to occur. The writing of a new Confession of Faith was undertaken. Plans for union with the United Presbyterian Church were begun. The boundaries of our Synods were radically changed and a sweeping reorganization of the church was made, which took all of the old boards and agencies that you and I were familiar with--the Board of World Missions, the Board of National Missions, the Board of Women's Work, and so on--and brought them together in one, great, centralized agency known as the General Executive Board.

Conservatives in the church were dismayed. Many of the conservatives were, in my opinion, wrongly opposed to social action in any form. They saw their church being taken away from them; they saw their church being led in directions they objected to. Some of them began to organize into groups and to talk of pulling out of the denomination. It was at this point in the late 1960s that a group of concerned churchmen got together to look at the church. They saw it at one end of the theological spectrum in control of a radical group of social-action oriented liberals, and being pulled at the other end by some ultra-conservatives, and they saw their church being torn asunder. This group of churchmen formed an organization that was conservative and evangelical in theology, yet which, at the same time, had deep social concerns. But for them, it was a matter of priorities. The first business of the church, they felt, was to lead a man to Jesus Christ. But by the same token, this didn't occur in a vacuum, you also must care for the circumstances of that man's life--and therefore you were concerned about social action. But it was a matter of priorities. Seeing then, that the church was being pulled apart, this group of moderates formed an organization that was to be known as "The Covenant Fellowship of Presbyterians."

Your pastor was one of the founders of that group and this congregation was one of the first and largest supporters of the group. They hoped to moderate the impact of the radical social-action group and at the same time be a cohesive force to hold the church together from the middle at a time when it threatened to fly apart. As time went on, the conservative groups did pull out of the denomination in the early 1970s; however, the size of the pull-out group was minimized and less than 50,000 left. Without the moderating force of the Covenant Fellowship, some have estimated that at least 250,000 would have left our church. So, while this middle group in the church was able to prevent a massive defection of conservatives, it has not yet been able to stop the impact of the now entrenched social activists.

The trends established by these activists continue to dominate the life of the church. While those trends have been somewhat moderated and muted, they are still the dominating force in our church. As a consequence of this, today we face a number of crises in our church. Let me share some of them with you.

First, we face an organizational crisis. The centralized system put in by the liberals in the early 1970s did not work. From a simple administrative standpoint, it was an absolute fiasco. The hastily adopted plan had major and fatal flaws that experienced managerial persons and executives of business across the church found very obvious. Laymen who knew anything at all about business and administration knew the system would not work, and as a consequence they lost confidence in the denominational structure. Their observations have proved to be more than correct; for the new plan has not worked--indeed, could not work. As a consequence, at this General Assembly, massive restructuring of the General Executive Board occurred. Perhaps, in retrospect, as we look back on this Assembly in years to come, we will look back upon this Assembly as this having been the most important act they took. Many of us still are not completely happy about the structure of the denomination, but at least a vast improvement has occurred. This is a great plus for the whole church.

The second crisis we face has to do with the qualifications of our leadership at the top level. In the late 1960s, the radical social-action leaders were in control, and they instituted practices at the national level to assure minority participation and balance. Now, that motive was noble and worthwhile, but the practical consequences were a disaster. Our General Executive Board, for example, calls for 72 members. About half of that number were ministers, many of whom had little practical sense, and the rest were made up of women, Blacks, Mexican-Americans, and other minority groups. As a consequence the 72-member board had only approximately 11 white male Ruling Elders. Like it or not, the knowledge and expertise of these Ruling Elders have given the church, in the past, its business ability, its administrative ability, and the normally conservative practices of good businessmen. The group that came to be the most discriminated against in our whole church was the Ruling Elders. The very people that had made the church the business organization that it needed to be in times past! The search for minority balance, however well motivated and however needed--landed the church in an administrative crisis because of liberal ministers who controlled half of the membership were not willing to give up their leadership to minority groups. Instead, they took it from the Ruling Elders. We simply did not have the leadership the denomination so desperately needed. Now, this year the Assembly took some steps to correct our leadership problem, but I am sorry to report that I do not believe it has gone nearly far enough.

The third crisis we found ourselves facing again has to do with our national leadership. Because the structure of the church is in the hands of a more radical social-action oriented group than is the church generally, the plans and the policies and the programs of the denomination at the national level have not been widely accepted by you people out there in the pew. A great majority of the denomination has found itself out of accord with what the denomination is doing at the national level. For example, the average Presbyterian objected strenuously to the action of the World Council of Churches in stimulating insurrection and rebellion in countries in Africa. The average Presbyterian in the pew violently resented the public statements of the National Council of Churches about the Panama Canal. And in all sorts of involvement of the denomination at the national level, the laymen found himself in basic disagreement. Yet, there was little he could do. The average Presbyterian sitting in the pew objected to the sort of Sunday School material being produced, to the sort of programs proposed, and to the sort of national conferences being conducted by our denomination. Yet, because he could do little or nothing about it, there was a growing frustration and resentment on the part of many Presbyterians. You will remember that this not only happened in our church but it caused a furor in

the United Presbyterian Church several years ago when, at the national level, the leaders chose to contribute funds to the defense of Angela Davis--to the frustration of the average man in the pew. Yet, because we can do little or nothing, there was growing frustration. Now, one practical consequence of this crisis is evident right here in our own congregation in that we found we could no longer use the Sunday School curriculum produced by our denomination. We didn't like it. It wasn't Christ-centered or Bible-centered. So we went outside the denomination to find a curriculum that we felt we wanted to use. While the Sunday School attendance of the denomination as a whole is declining, here at Central our Sunday school has become in growth, so that we found it necessary to enter a building program to take care of the increased attendance. Another example--the women are interested in this--is the Women of the Church program. You had the old Board of Women's Work--a nation-wide program that all of the women participated in, and each local congregation's women's group participated in the whole program, but that structure was radicalized by the social activists. As a consequence, it became irrelevant at the local level. As a result, the Women's program at the national level has practically ceased to be. Our women still have one of the most viable women's organizations of any church in the denomination.

I wish I could assure you this morning that the Assembly this year took steps to guarantee that the denominational program becomes more relevant to the local church. I wish I could assure you that what is being produced by our denomination at the national level will become more and more acceptable to us. However, I do not believe that will happen in the immediate future. This crisis will continue for the time being. I do not mean to imply that there is no improvement--there is. For example, at the conference level of our denomination they had so radicalized the programs at Montreat that people had quit going. This moderate group I told you about, the Covenant Fellowship, went into Montreat and began to have conferences. They had a family conference over the July 4th weekend--many of you went--and it became the biggest conference in the history of our denomination. We put on a youth conference. They said that young people were not interested in conferences anymore, but the truth was that young people were not interested in the conferences they put on. The young people wanted to know about Jesus, so we went in and put on a Christ-centered conference. We began to have the largest youth conferences in the history of the denomination. So, the denomination took over these conferences that we were doing and we are still helping to run them. D.A. Sharpe, one of our young Deacons, is the national director for the Family Conference at Montreat this year. There are improvements. They said that the church wasn't interested in old fashioned evangelism, but the Covenant Fellowship went out and began a program of evangelism and lay renewal. We have seen this church be touched by lay renewal programs. Many of you have participated in lay renewal programs across the denomination in which we have seen whole congregations come on fire for Jesus Christ. People are interested; people are spiritually hungry. As a consequence of this, we have been able to get an office of evangelism at the national level in our church. So it is not all negative, but the overall trends are not likely to change in the near future.

The fourth crisis I want to mention is the financial crisis. For the 8-year period from 1956 to 1963 giving in our denomination kept pace right along with inflation. Giving across our church remained at about 4 1/2 percent of income. That's what we Presbyterians were giving of our income to the church--4 1/2 percent. However, beginning in 1964 as radicalization began to occur, our per capita giving began to decline until today it is only 3 1/2 percent. So, in terms of what we have (you and I), we are giving less to the church. But that isn't the whole story, either. The amount that the church is getting at the national level is decreasing. In 1967 we gave (the whole denomination) 21 percent of what it received to the courts above--

Presbytery, Synod and General Assembly. However, in 1968, that began to decline and today, the local churches, on an average only give 15 percent of what they receive to the courts beyond the local church. So, the local church is getting less and we are giving less of what we get to the national level. It has brought about a financial crisis in our church, as you can well imagine. In dollars and cents, here is how it works out: if your giving and mine had kept pace with inflation in 1975 last year as a denomination, we would have given \$229 million dollars. Instead, we actually gave \$185 million. Everything being equal, we would have had \$24 million more in the local church for our work and \$20 million more for work beyond the local level. That means that we should have had \$48 million just to keep pace with inflation in order to keep doing the things we were doing (not doing anything new!) But we actually got, at that level, only \$28 million. That means that we have had to cut programs, cut personnel, and bring missionaries home. If you want to know why missionaries are being brought home, it is because you and I aren't giving the money.

It seems to me, though, that the real questions are these: Why are you and I giving less of a percentage of our income to the church? Why are we giving less of what we do give to the church on to the Assembly? Perhaps there are many answers to that, but surely one of the reasons is a confidence gap. Many laymen today have lost confidence in the leadership of the church and the sort of programs it produces. At the Assembly this year there were many things that didn't happen that some of us hoped would happen and some of the liberal trends that we object to will continue. On the other hands, some other things have happened that have moderated or muted the trends--for those we can rejoice. For example, a layman, a missionary to Brazil, a warm, contagious individual, Jule Spach, was elected moderator. He will have a great influence for good as he goes about the church in the coming year. The national organization of our denomination has been modified and this is good, a decided plus.

In closing, let me make two observations. First, let us not take ourselves and our times too seriously. The second observation is this: the reason we shouldn't take ourselves too seriously is because we trust the Lord of the Church, who is also the Lord of history.