

**“Flowing Rivers”**  
**Isaiah 58:6-11; John 7:37-39**

It always makes me nervous when the people who win at the Academy Awards get up and begin to thank people without using a list. They hesitate, and I have this fear that they will stumble and forget some really important person. Today, I am going to be talking about Westminster, and I feel the same way. As a result of that fear, I may mention a few names this morning, but not mention the rest, the hundreds of people who have worked for our church. You know who you are, and God knows who you are, and to find out more about these people you can read the church history. For the most part, I am going to organize my sermon around numbers.

Here is the first one, 219. This is the 219<sup>th</sup> time that the Presbyterian General Assembly has met since 1789 in Philadelphia. If you didn't grow up Presbyterian, you may not know how our system works. We elect leaders called elders, and they constitute our Session which leads our congregation. Sessions in one area join to form Presbyteries, and Presbyteries in several states form a Synod. Finally, they all culminate in the General Assembly, our national body which meets every few years. Currently, as we are gathered here for worship, the General Assembly is also gathering for worship in Minneapolis, Minnesota. They are getting ready for a big week of debate, discussion and decision making, and are worshipping God, and praying for the Holy Spirit to be with them as they work this week. I decided that this morning, we would use as our scripture the same one they chose for their worship service, and for the theme of this General Assembly meeting, John 7:37-38, “Out of the believer's heart shall flow streams of living water.”

Usually, when we think of living water in the Bible, it is an image where God refreshes us with living water. Here, John turns that idea around. Not only are we given life from the living water of Christ, we are then called to care for a thirsty world as we pour out living water on those around us. Today, I want us to look at our congregation and see some of the living water we have spread. In most cases, we have started with a trickle, which became a stream, which became a river.

Here is the next number, 29. That is the age of a young man from Ashville, who as a newlywed, in 1985, went with his wife to Africa to become a missionary. The name of the couple is Frank and Nancy Dimmock. Our church decided to send some money each year to help their work. Frank ended up in charge of a hospital in Malawi with 150 beds, a pretty big job for someone who was 29. They went right to work, and also right to work on starting a family. A year after their wedding, Nathan was born, whose name means “gift from God.” Two or three weeks after the birth, a family brought in

a newborn whose mother had died in birth. Now the baby was dying too, from dehydration and a lack of nutrition. Nancy began to feed and care for the baby along with Nathan. They named the new baby Moses, and they fell in love, and their family grew overnight. They now have 8 children, half adopted.

One of our church members, Hots Easley, knew Al Dimmock, Frank's father, and on his own decided to go to Africa to see the hospital and see if he could help, using his skills as an OBGYN. How many of you saw the video of the triplets Dr. Easley delivered on his first trip? He came back with so much enthusiasm, that he got our church excited about this mission. He took 11 trips to Africa, taking medical teams, and accessing needs. He got us to send \$20,000 for molds for bricks and tiles, and the villagers around the hospital made hundreds of thousands of brick for buildings. When a residential school for the deaf was started on the compound, children who had been treated as animals now had a future, and today many of those little ones have graduated. The ministry grew, and we sent some trickles of money and people, and they became a stream, and then a river. Orphan feeding programs, outreach clinics, health education, emergency nursery, and much, much more grew under the work of the Dimmocks. Frank and Nancy have now been moved to Lesotho, just so that they can have closer access to an airport, because over the years, their influence, their administrative ability, and their expertise has grown. Frank has transformed health care in eastern Africa, and is now an advisor for Christian hospital care for eight countries: Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Zambia, South Africa, Cameroon, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. From a trickle, to a stream, to a river. And remember their son Moses? He is currently 24, and is ready to begin work as a volunteer in mission for the Presbyterian Church, USA.

Eleven is our next number. That is the number of missionaries and international mission projects we are helping directly through our denomination. This is in addition to undesignated mission money that we give. Our support helps advocate for female political prisoners in the Philippines, supports girls schools in Pakistan, teaches theological education to Spanish speakers in Madrid, and much more. Our newest missionary pair is in Nicaragua. The couple there are working with a consortium of religious groups, peace cooperatives, and community organizations. Our trickle has barely made a splash, but this organization teaches community organization, and changes the lives of villagers. One pastor has taken 20 courses from this group in the last 15 years, and brought the information back to her village. She has learned how to organize a preschool, run "patio farms" of pigs, chickens and sheep, how to vaccinate animals, how to use organic fertilizer, how to understand government regulations and programs, has had theological studies,

learned how to apply for grant money and more. We look forward to being a part of what for us is a new mission field.

It is harder to see the results of our work overseas, but Westminster has been a vital part in ministry in our community as well, and we can witness some of the results better. When our members see a problem, they use their imagination, plus their resources, plus hard work to improve our community. Some things you know about. Some you may not. Our philosophy is to give seed money for a project, support it, and then watch it succeed on its own. We don't put our name on everything. It is not the "Westminster" program or building. We get things going and then let them develop.

Here is a number, 22. That's how many churches turned away a request to start Meals on Wheels in their churches in 1968. We said yes, and the program began here with a storage closet for an office, serving meals to 12 people. After 21 years they moved to their own facility and now serve almost 40,000 meals a year. Our trickle became a stream and then a rushing river.

One of the best things we have done for the community is our Weekday School, which since the 1960's has prepared children for the first grade. With loving teachers and a wonderful curriculum, the hundreds of children who have gone through the program start out school so ahead of the game that their peers have a hard time catching up!

Oh, wait.....maybe that is not so good! How many children from the poor neighborhood one or two miles down the street get that Weekday School education? The number is, 0. That began to bother us, and we wondered what we could do about it. Scholarships? Busses? Neither of those seemed practical. In 1992, we began six week summer programs for children from the housing project, Piedmont Manor, helping them to get ready for first grade. At the same time, we committed \$100,000 to the problem, and one of our members, Lydia Kellett, began searching for more money. She bugged people and pushed people for years, until she raised millions, and in 2000, a child care center was built right along the Piedmont Manor fence, where any parent could walk their preschool child to class. Each year 76 children have attended. Seventy six times ten years so far -- that is pretty good. That was not enough for Lydia, however. She worked for five more years until enough money was raised to build a community center that has programs for 70-80 senior adults each week, after school tutoring for 50 children, health clinics, a media lab to teach computer skills, and GED classes with daycare for young mothers.

Here is another number, 6. Did you know that in 2005, our church built 6 apartments to be rented at low price to people with mental illnesses who can live independently? You probably don't have any idea where they even are. This is in addition to the huge amount of work and money our congregation gave to build residential apartments at the Gateway House in the 1980s.

How about the number 10? Did you know that if you are a boy and your mother and you become homeless, if you are over 10 years old you are not allowed to stay in an area shelter with her? You would have to be separated and taken somewhere else. That is why GAIHN was started, a hospitality network of churches that supply rooms and meals so that families can stay together. Westminster assists with two weeks of this program each year, and the needs are growing.

This next number is a date, 9/11, one we have heard too often. Just before that tragedy, our church was getting ready to start a building project, and like all our projects, we had planned to tithe the amount raised. If we raised 1 million, we would give away \$100,000 dollars, if we raised two million dollars, \$200,000, etc. When the terrorist hit, it was clear we could not raise the money for the project that we had hoped to begin with a campaign in October of that year. The only problem was that we had already spent our tithe before we had it. Uh-oh, not very good business sense!

United Ministries had just finished a new building to focus on adult education, and we had promised them \$350,000 to run the program for ten years. We did not have the money. We and they were kind of in a panic. Our Session, however, in spite of the uncertainties of that fall, decided to go ahead and give the money to United Ministries anyway. We trusted that through the Holy Spirit and the generosity of our members, that we would be able to be faithful to the promise we had made. Beth Templeton, the director of United Ministries was shocked! She said, "I have never heard of another church who takes so seriously the mandate of the gospel." Over the years the numbers of graduates from that GED program has grown from a handful, to 70 people having a graduating ceremony each year in our own Fellowship Hall, to outgrowing our space in 2008, because they had 178 people graduate that year! Think of the families and lives changed! A trickle became a stream, and then became a river!

We have focused on our international work, and on just a fraction of our work in Greenville. We also find that to our own congregation, rivers of living water flow from our believer's hearts. So many people do so many things – often without anyone being aware. Did you know there is a woman who comes in each Monday and waters all the church plants? Did you know teams of workers come each week to get the sanctuary ready for worship? After each wedding, there is a group of women who come in on Monday and take those huge, gigantic flower arrangements and break them down into little vases and take them to our sick and shut-ins, as many as 20 a week. Did you know that there are three men who do the masonry work for free each time someone dies and their ashes are put in the Columbarium? They take use their own time and do the manual work to prepare the niches, saving our families a great deal of

money? There are lots of jobs like this, and a lot of people who do them unbeknownst to most of us.

Here is a number, 429. That's how many children there are in our church in the eighth grade or younger. Add to that 100 high school students. You have spent hundreds and hundreds of hours teaching them about God and to love and care for the world. Just last week, 48 young people and adults returned from a mission trip to the Dominican Republic, doing mission work in Batey 7, a squatter's village of 15,000 Haitian sugar cane workers who are destitute. Our church is working on bringing clean water, food, and education to this batey, one of 500 in the Dominican Republic. In addition to the work that they did, why do we take our youth on mission trips like this? It is because there is no other way that we can impress on them the gap in resources and the great needs around the world. Our It's Elementary and Tween students gathered 700 cans of food for the Samaritan House. Our Vacation Bible School children gathered "Nickels for Nets" to buy mosquito nets to combat the malaria they learned about during their lessons on love, and care, and sharing. We don't know the outcome on the lives of the children or of the people they have touched. We are confident that with the help of the Holy Spirit, this understanding that Presbyterians work to change the world will start out as a trickle in them, and then grow to a stream, and then to a river. The work of God will continue.

This week, let us pray for our 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly as they gather to worship and work. There will be disagreements, and boredom, and excitement, and frustration. But we know that the elders and ministers representing us there will also be true to their ordination vows to serve God and the church with energy, intelligence, imagination and love. We all are committed to the call that John instills to be the source of living water which helps to refresh the world. Let us remain faithful to that call in our missions around the world, in our community, and to the people closest to us.

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