



Jan-April 2022



Gains and Losses

March 16, 2022

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The numbers are in! Thanks to all of our Clerks of Session and other church leaders who completed the annual statistical report! Among other pieces of information, the report lets us know where our membership stands numerically. This past year, the Presbytery gained 144 members, including 46 Confirmands. I'm delighted that we continue to be a place of caring and welcome and spiritual nurture for people, especially those new to their faith. Thank you, Churches!

Now for the rest of the story...our total losses were 434. That included 20 transfers, 125 deaths, and 289 people cleared from our official rolls. Deaths and transfers are saddening, but natural. The other losses though are perhaps more disheartening.

We might want to blame it all on COVID: that because people stopped coming to the church building, now they're not coming back. Perhaps. I wonder though how many of the people cleared from the rolls were inactive before the pandemic started. Maybe we've just made a more intentional effort to look at our membership and decide who is really in. I pray our members' affiliation is not just with a building, but with a congregation.

This past weekend at my daughter's house, I got into a tussle with their Roomba. This automated vacuuming disk slides around the house, sucking up debris. Then, it returns to its docking station in the dining room. As I scooted some heavy boxes around, I kept bumping into the Roomba. I knocked it off its docking station once. I kicked it another time. Both times, it protested with squawks and lights until I redocked it properly. When at last it was home, it quieted down contentedly.

For some of us, returning to our buildings is like redocking. With the decline in COVID cases, most of our congregations are returning to in-person worship, though many are keeping masking and distancing protocols. Being together again is a welcome development!

Not everyone has come back, however. Some, I've guessed, were inactive before the pandemic. For others though, "going to church" no longer holds interest. No doubt there will be thorough, expensive studies done about why. I pray, however, that each of your congregations will do that same study with the members you've lost. As part of the care we show for our family of faith, we should explore in a guilt-free conversation why people have chosen to leave. Let's not just assume it's due to COVID, but let's use their departures as a point for self-reflection.

What if the reason for not coming was a feeling they were outsiders or their children with disabilities weren't welcomed? What if they wanted to be part of church that is more engaged with the community, working toward addressing needs? How would those honest answers change us?

Some might disagree with our theology or prefer a different style of worship or challenge the positions of our denomination on issues of social justice. How do we wrestle with creating a space of inclusivity that doesn't diminish our discipleship?

There will be times to say goodbye to people in our family faith, including times when it is best for everyone to part ways. I hope though we'll understand their decision and hold it tenderly, with grace and humility. Then, what feels like a loss can actually be our gain.