

## **Interview with Rob Ater, Council Moderator**

**Presbytery of Milwaukee**

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### **Council Leadership Successful through Time of Change and Transition**

Serving in a leadership capacity requires communication, strategic and visionary skills. Just ask Rev. Robert Ater, currently Associate Pastor at Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Milwaukee. Rob served on the Presbytery Council from February of 2012 until March of 2018. He was Presbytery Moderator in 2013 and Council Moderator in 2016 and 2017.

There was a learning curve. During Rob's time on Council, there were several achievements which Rob shares proudly, each requiring understanding and mastery over new skills. First, the group used the What's Next document as their vade mecum, which guided them to form the Presbytery Gathering Planning Team, paving the way to reformatting the Presbytery Gatherings. Rob was convener of the Presbytery Gathering Planning Team for the first three years, beginning them down the path of the reformat. Secondly, the group developed a first draft of guidelines to use when a congregation wants to leave the Presbytery, as in the case of First Presbyterian Church in Oostburg. Council steered that departure.

Two years in the making, the What's Next document was approved three months into Rob's service on Council in 2012. In 2010, the Presbytery Constitution changed, removing the prohibition on openly gay leaders. In 2014, marriage equality was added to the Constitution. All three of these changes impacted the context for ministry in the presbytery and Council sought to embrace its leadership role, guiding the Presbytery through the transition.

Other presbytery leaders sometimes joked with him during his tenure of service that Rob would often bring up What's Next at some point in the meeting. There is a reason for this. There was a big investment in the What's Next vision for the presbytery, both financially and emotionally, and Rob used its defined strategies as a guide for leadership. He prefers to state why we do things rather than what we're doing. This was how he led Council, as a mission-based organization. He revisited What's Next often because that defined the Presbytery's mission and values.

There was a significant investment of time in Rob's role. The two-hour monthly meetings were just a fraction of the time he invested. He often spent several hours drafting the agenda for each meeting, and there was follow-up activity after each meeting. Rob encouraged Council colleagues to take on assignments as well and found that members of Council readily took on leadership roles, assuring that not any one person become overloaded. It was a very functional work team.

Rob was protective of the people who volunteered on Council along with him. As a result, one of his most involved challenges was to determine if requests made of Council should in fact be

Council's responsibility, or if they were more appropriately addressed by another committee or work team. Sometimes, requests were better served by going before the entire Presbytery during quarterly business meetings. Rob was serious about examining requests to Council and analyzing them to determine who was the most appropriate resource for the decision. In the last few years, Rob has tried to "reframe Council as the leadership body of the Presbytery."

Volunteering in a capacity such as Council is an "opportunity to taste the wider Church," to "experience the connectional Church." It's an opportunity to understand the Church better.

A particular responsibility of Council is nominating members to serve on the Presbytery Nominating Committee, which is charged with populating the standing committees and commissions in the Presbytery. One of Rob's last tasks on Council was to follow up with the people who were nominated, talking with each of them to share wisdom and inspire them in their new roles. He said communication is key with new members on any team and recalls his first presbytery committee meeting, when no one helped him to know what to expect, failing to invite him to bring a lunch to his first noontime meeting. In his visits with new Nominating Team members, Rob has tried to be inclusive, informative and welcoming.

What's the next horizon for Rob? He will be working with the Leadership Team to fulfill a mandate from What's Next, the formation of new leaders in the Presbytery. The What's Next document has identified that leadership development is key, including how to identify leadership strategically and match what Church aspires to do with the passions of the individual.

Thank you to Rob for leading the way with his contribution of time and talent.