

Introducing John Wilkinson

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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The General assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) starts this week in Detroit, Michigan. After our last General Assembly, when I delved deeply into national politics, I have remained gleefully ignorant of what's happening. But I do have a friend, Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana, who's standing for Vice-Moderator. (For MAMD wisdom, [buy her book](#) but if you want a quick course on how brilliant she is, you can start with [her blog](#).) So I wanted to write a bit about Rev. Dr. John Wilkinson, who is standing for Moderator with MaryAnn. Sadly, I couldn't get an interview with Wilkinson, because I was swamped when he was available and now that I'm available, he's not. I don't know him personally, so probably my best option at this point is to just point you to [John and MaryAnn's blog](#).

I've read through the posts and articles on John. His bio is made up of the things one would expect of a candidate: solid pastoral positions and strong service to the church and denomination. He earned a Ph.D. in American Religious History, in which he delved into Presbyterian history and the "Politics of Reconciliation."

The most interesting post was [his answer](#) to the question, "What are some of the exciting possibilities facing the 21st Century church? What are the challenges that face the church in this century?"

I BELIEVE that our possibilities and opportunities far outweigh our challenges. God has given us all the gifts we need — the resources and vision and leadership — to respond faithfully in the uncharted waters of the 21st century. I agree with Phyllis Tickle when she writes in *The Great Emergence* that churches like ours, based on a deep tradition, will be well positioned to respond to the changes coming our way. I believe we are called to be agents of transformation and reconciliation, not waiting either complacently or fearfully to see what happens, but leading the church boldly into the places where the Spirit is calling us.

We know the challenges. The SBNR (spiritual but not religious) generation, those who respond “none” when asked about religious affiliation, are in our families and communities. We read survey after survey and blog post after blog post about the fading relevance of faith in the culture, especially for younger generations. We read about political division in our nation, about crushing poverty and the social divide. We live in a world that feels like a powder keg, ready to explode at any moment.

And yet...

Our Presbyterian family is poised for faithful response.

We must be mindful that we do not respond in order to recapture a vision of the church that once was, or to prop up the institutional church. Not at all.

We have extraordinary answers to the big faith questions of the day: Who is Jesus? How do I think about other religions? Does my life have meaning? Do we make a difference in the world? Potential moments to connect and serve are abundant.

We Presbyterians at our best insist that God cares for all of life, not just the “churchy” parts, and that all of us —

ALL of us — are called and gifted to make a difference in the world.

Therefore, we can be a model of reconciliation to the broader culture as we engage our very real differences with civility and respect. We can offer young people avenues of service. We can be an oasis for families seeking to raise children. We can be a voice for the voiceless in our cities and nations. We can be faithful world citizens. We can think about the faith in creative and lively ways. We can move beyond our walls into our communities to meet people and meet needs. ***And people will notice this.***

If we do these things with urgent hope, we may not grow numerically — although we have in the congregations where I have served. We do them because we are called to faithfulness, as we remember that “hope does not disappoint.” (Romans 5:5) And as we do them — with God’s help — the world will be transformed. And God will be glorified and enjoyed.