

Administrative Review Task Force on Dakota Presbytery

Final Report

September 2008

This Task Force was created at the January 2007 meeting of the Synod of Lakes and Prairies (Action 11-96, Page 2444-6, Minutes, Fifty-ninth Meeting of the Synod, January 2007). The purpose of the Task Force is to determine if the Presbytery of Dakota “is or, in a reasonable amount of time, can become viable as a middle governing body of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) ...” and to make recommendations to the synod based on its findings. In the enabling action, the task force was instructed to make a final report and to bring recommendations to the January 2008 synod meeting, “if possible.” At the January 2008 meeting of the synod (Page 2670, Minutes, Sixty-second Meeting of the Synod, January 2008), the Task Force was extended and instructed to return a final report no later than the January 2009 meeting of the Synod, if possible.

Moderator Kathleen Dooley appointed the following people to the Task Force:

- **The Reverend Robert Bouton**, Cedar Rapids, Iowa (EI-current commissioner) – Bob has worked with the synod, off and on, since 1968. He was introduced to the Presbytery of Dakota by Dr. James Spalding who had a special interest in the Dakota people. Bob attended Dubuque Seminary with the Reverend Simon Looking Elk, currently the Stated Clerk for Dakota Presbytery. Bob has served on Synod Council and as a commissioner to the synod for numerous terms.
- **Commissioned Lay Pastor Kevin Kaufmann**, Devils Lake, ND, (NP) – Kevin serves the church in Devils Lake, ND and also moderates the Session of Bdecan Presbyterian Church, Tokio, ND (Dakota Presbytery).
- **The Reverend Val Putnam**, Sioux Falls, SD (SD) – Val is pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Sioux Falls. She has past experience working for the Indian Health Service with her husband in Wagner, SD. As Moderator of the Synod, Val was part of a task force to review the relationship between Dakota Presbytery and the synod in 2001.
- **Elder JoAnn Simser**, St. Paul, Minn., (TCA-current commissioner) – JoAnn is Moderator of the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area and a member of the Presbytery Council. As chair of the Outreach/Mission Committee, Macalester Plymouth United Church, she was involved with sponsoring mission trips to Native American missions. As a peer consultant-evaluator, she has provided advice and consul to Native American colleges.
- **Elder Betty Walker**, Burnsville, Minn., (TCA) – Betty is a full-blood Creek/Seminole Indian, born and raised in Oklahoma and has lived for over 25 years in Minnesota. She is a four-time member of the Session at Presbyterian Church of the Apostles in Burnsville and currently serves as Clerk of Session.

Each of these members has significant experience with the Presbytery of Dakota, Native American people, and/or the Synod of Lakes and Prairies. Staffing the Task Force are Synod Executive Phil Brown and Stated Clerk/Treasurer Jay Wilkinson.

History

1. The Synod of Lakes and Prairies created the Administrative Review Task Force based on a number of reasons, including:
 - a. Dakota Presbytery, established in 1844, has a long history that includes an institutional dependency on denominational structures for administration in its placement under the Board of National Missions, and, since 1973, with the Synod of Lakes and Prairies following reorganization of the church.
 - b. The immense geography of the presbytery, the chronic poverty and the lack of economic infrastructure are serious impediments to the orderly conduct of business.
 - c. The lack of sufficient funds and the small number of churches, pastors and members along with the lack of sufficient funds severely impede the work of the presbytery.
 - d. Since the dissolution of the Board of National Missions in the early 1970's, the presbytery has not acquired financial self-sufficiency. While some other presbyteries within the bounds of this synod have experienced periods of being net aid-receiving presbyteries, the differences lie in the consistent dependency of Dakota Presbytery and the degree of its financial support.
 - e. There are periods of time when the presbytery fails to keep adequate records and does not carry out a number of the duties of a presbytery enumerated in the *Book of Order* at G-11.0103. Specifically, the presbytery has been unable to resolve problems within several churches (G-11.0103e), to provide pastoral care for the churches and members of presbytery, visiting sessions ... (G-11.0103g), to review session records (G-11.0103x), to take special oversight of churches without pastors (G-11.0103k), and to establish and maintain ecumenical relationships (G-11.0103u).

Task Force Activities

1. The Administrative Review Task Force met nine times and conducted “conversations” numerous times between meetings by e-mail. Several members of the task force attended the May 2007 meeting of the Presbytery of Dakota. The task force met with several leaders of Dakota Presbytery in August 2007. Responding to suggestions that the task force meet with a wider audience, the task force was host to an open meeting for all interested parties from the presbytery just prior to the May 2008 meeting of the presbytery. The task force chose not to meet with individual congregations because the task force was charged to determine the viability of the presbytery and not of congregations.
2. The task force met with others who hold a vast knowledge of the history of the people of Dakota and the synod, and synod's relationship with the Presbytery of Dakota. These individuals included Elona Street-Stewart, the synod's Associate for Racial Ethnic Ministry; Bonnie Sue Lewis, Associate Professor of Mission and Native American Ministry, University of Dubuque Theological Seminary; and Mark Tammen, Office of the General Assembly.
3. Members of the task force studied numerous documents, including:
 - a. Presbytery of Dakota Minutes going back more 50 years
 - b. Dakota financial records dating back to 1835
 - c. Presbytery property records

- d. Comprehensive Presbytery Mission Support (CPMS) from the synod dating back to the mid 1970s
- e. The work of previous commissions
- f. Documents related to attempts to merge Dakota churches into geographic presbyteries during the 1960s and 1980s
- g. The book, *Creating Christian Indians*, written by Dr. Bonnie Sue Lewis
- h. The paper, *The Presbyterian and Congregational Churches Among the Dakota*, by Charles A Maxfield, a project in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master in Theology

Observations and Findings

1. Over the years there have been at least two ineffective attempts to dissolve the presbytery and integrate the Dakota churches into geographic presbyteries.
 - a. In 1954 the General Assembly created the Special Committee on Segregated Synods and Presbyteries. In 1960 that committee reported, "Plans are under way for conferences between designated members of the Committee and ... the Presbytery of Dakota, Synod of South Dakota, with churches geographically located in the synods of South Dakota, North Dakota, Minnesota and the Rockies."
 - b. In 1963, it was reported, "A plan of merger between the presbyteries of Black Hills and Dakota was approved by Black Hills in April 1961 and rejected by Dakota in August 1961. ... The Dakota Presbytery, according to informed sources, has taken the stand that they will continue to study possible mergers and that during the period of such study there should be experience of exchange of pulpits, fellowship between Indian and non-Indian congregations or organizations. Several favorable exchanges of this nature have been taking place."
 - c. In 1964, it was reported, "With respect to the question of the Dakota Presbytery, the General Assembly Committee met with a number of the ministers and elders of that presbytery in January 1964. ... The long and culturally unique character of the Dakota Presbytery plus the lack of active efforts on the part of white churches and presbyteries toward understanding and adjustment to ease integration, add up to a present lack of preparation on the part of both bodies toward assimilation. ... The Synod of South Dakota and the Board of National Missions, through its national Missions Committees, have a great sensitivity of their own identification with both the problem and the solution."
 - d. In 1965, it was reported, "We are also happy to report that real progress is under way in the Dakota situation."
 - e. The Synod of South Dakota brought an overture to the General Assembly in 1967 that stated, "On the realignment of the Presbyteries of the Synod of South Dakota, to become effective January 1, 1976." This included the realignment of virtually all of the presbyteries in the synod and also included churches to be realigned in Montana (Yellowstone Presbytery), and the synods of North Dakota and Minnesota.
 - f. The Synod of South Dakota brought an overture to the General Assembly in 1970, based on an overture to the synod from the Presbytery of Dakota, that included the following: "That the Presbytery of Dakota is looking toward eventual geographic alignment be continued until such time as the Synod of South Dakota or the proper judicatory after request from the

Presbytery of Dakota shall take proper steps to determine realignment.” An Administrative Commission of the Synod of South Dakota was continued.

- g. Realignment still had not occurred by the time of reunion which created the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1983. The Articles of Agreement at the time of reunion called for the elimination of non-geographic presbyteries. The task was then turned over to the General Assembly Special Committee on Presbytery and Synod Boundaries, which continued the work toward assimilation of the Presbytery of Dakota into geographic presbyteries. In 1989, this special committee reported, “The special committee has been working throughout portions of its existence with the Dakota Presbytery and the Council of the Synod of Lakes and Prairies regarding the question of that presbytery’s non-geographic boundaries. ... Where boundary matters involve presbyteries based on racial ethnic or language consideration (such as the Dakota Presbytery), the expected time of completion of the work of the special Committee is 10 years after reunion (or 1993), with the possibility of extension. ...” The message to the General Assembly in 1992 was, “After a number of years of involvement and three years of significant efforts on the part of all concerned to seek to implement Article 7 of the Articles of Agreement in the Dakota Presbytery situation, the special committee has come to the conclusion that no mutually acceptable plan can be found to realign the five presbyteries in such a way as to eliminate the overlap of boundaries currently existing.” During these later years, an administrative commission of the Synod of Lakes and Prairies worked on the same situation and came to the same conclusion.
2. Of the approximately 110 Native American ministries of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), only the 20 congregations of Dakota Presbytery belong to a non-geographic presbytery. All others belong to geographic-based presbyteries.
3. The term “viable” does not fit well – nor is it likely to fit in the future – when applying the term as a description of a presbytery and its responsibilities as described in Chapter 11 of the *Form of Government*. In the past several decades the synod has in many ways provided for the *Form of Government* responsibilities of the presbytery. Neither the synod, nor the Office of the General Assembly, possesses the human and material resources to continue any such supportive role in the future.
4. There are congregations, clusters of congregations, representatives of presbyteries within and beyond this synod who provide support – human and material – to the congregations of the Presbytery of Dakota. The synod has little – at best – direct knowledge of the extent of this support because nothing is reported other than by the Lutheran leadership of the Pine Ridge (S.D.) Retreat Center and numerous references to mission trips to Dakota churches in the *Mission Yearbook for Prayer & Study*.
5. The congregations of Dakota Presbytery have a long and rich history of ministry with Native American people, especially worship and mission activities. Annual reporting of congregational member or financial statistics is lacking and it is very difficult to acquire any real picture of what is going on within the presbytery.
6. The composition of the Presbytery of Dakota and its congregations is very complex, often based on key families in each church, different reservations, different tribes and great distances between church

clusters. It is impossible for the Administrative Review Task Force to discern the various influences and how it all serves the Church of Jesus Christ through the window of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

7. Dakota Presbytery meetings exude a very spiritual nature. What the presbytery does best and naturally is to gather for its spring and fall meetings (and an ecumenical mission conference with the United Church of Christ) to worship, to share stories, to enjoy fellowship and to break bread around the meal tables. In these experiences, spiritual nourishment thrives. In contrast, maintaining the organizational structures necessary for a presbytery – and carrying out the business at hand – is difficult and appears to be a drain on spiritual nourishment.
8. The presbytery utilizes the option to commission elders as Lay Pastors, though the elders lack the training and requirements specified by the *Form of Government*.
9. It is difficult for the presbytery to provide representation to the synod assembly and its structures – an expectation of all presbyteries. Some positions have been left vacant. Presbytery representatives to some positions have failed to attend meetings. The last two synod commissioners with faithful attendance have been minister members of the presbytery, though not Native American. Those who have attended meetings have often been valuable committee members.
10. The lack of trust between Dakota Presbytery and the Synod of Lakes and Prairies is a major issue, possibly related to the long history of mistreatment of Native Americans by the encroaching American government and a church that required the indigenous peoples to abandon all native practices (including language) in order to become Christian and to survive. Many of the people of Dakota still feel the pain of broken treaties. The Task Force has been intentional about not imposing solutions on the Dakota Presbytery. Any outside suggestion for some form of resolution to the current situation of Dakota is rejected outright or simply ignored. At the same time, no proposal emanates from presbytery leadership, other than to slow or halt the decrease in CPMS funding – not a responsibility of the Administrative Review Task Force.
11. It is important for the people of Dakota to be able to control their own destiny. “Self determination” was a common theme expressed to the task force. It is important for the Dakota to maintain the commissioner representation at the General Assembly.
12. There are significant cultural and historical issues affecting Dakota Presbytery’s capacity to function as other presbyteries, such as the oral tradition of the Dakota people versus the written nature of the *Form of Government*. It is unreasonable to expect that Dakota Presbytery – or indeed, many other cultures, such as recent immigrant cultures – will conduct itself in the manner prescribed in the *Book of Order*, which comes mostly from a western and northern European heritage and language.

Conclusions

1. Any plan to integrate the churches of Dakota Presbytery into geographic presbyteries is doomed to failure. The people of Dakota do not want it to happen. The geographic presbyteries involved are not prepared to deal with the problems inherent in the cultural differences. However, if individual

churches, at some future time, desire to align with a geographic presbytery, those requests would be seriously considered.

2. Given the current requirements of Chapter 11 of the *Form of Government*, the Presbytery of Dakota is not viable, nor is it likely to be in the foreseeable future. The task force cannot recommend that the Synod of Lakes and Prairies be satisfied with the status quo, ignoring the synod's responsibilities in the *Book of Order*.
3. This task force feels sadness that there is no apparent desire on the part of Dakota Presbytery to create a mutual partnership on any level. The task force has met resistance every step of the way. Each alternative that has been proposed by the task force has been resisted or ignored. For example, there has not been any openness to discussing the possibility of a "fellowship" no matter how defined. (There is no current provision for a "fellowship of congregations" in the *Book of Order*. Such a direction will require an overture to the General Assembly.) At the same time the Presbytery of Dakota has not suggested any alternatives. The Task Force has concluded that any recommendations related to the question of "viability as a governing body" would proceed to the synod from the Task Force without the "blessing" or endorsement of the Presbytery.
4. The current presbytery Moderator/Synod Commissioner Jerry Swanson suggested that the synod provide more money in order to provide a presbytery chaplain and "postpone the reduction of CPMS" (mission support dollars currently at \$100,000 and set to decline by \$25,000/year). Financial support, including CPMS, was outside the realm of responsibilities assigned to this task force; therefore, the task force offers no comment on this suggestion.
5. It appears that the only mutually acceptable solution is to allow the Presbytery of Dakota to continue with its current privileges (such as commissioning of Lay Pastors and ordaining Ministers of Word and Sacrament) without being held accountable for the responsibilities in Chapter 11. If this is to be accomplished, it would require an overture to General Assembly for changes in the *Book of Order*.
6. The deadline for a final report is the January 2009 meeting of the synod. This task force desires to present its report to the synod in September 2008 in order to be received and considered by experienced commissioners, rather than asking new commissioners in January to make important decisions without knowing the history of this task force.

The work of this task force is now concluded. The task force respectfully requests that it be dismissed.

M/S/C: That the report of the Administrative Review Task Force on the Presbytery of Dakota (September 2008) be accepted and referred to the Synod staff working with the Steering Committee to develop an overture for consideration by the 219th General Assembly (2010), and

That a draft of such an overture be presented to the April 2009 meeting of the Synod for consideration and action, and

That consideration be given to reviewing the draft overture with the Presbytery of Dakota with the objective of gaining their support for the overture or a revision thereof, and

That the members of the above Task Force remain available to the staff, Steering Committee and future meetings of the Synod for consultation.

M/S/C: That the Administrative Review Task Force on the Presbytery of Dakota be dismissed with gratitude.

M/S/C: That the Synod request an action by the Dakota Presbytery to invite the Administrative Review Task Force on the Dakota Presbytery to a regular or special meeting of the Dakota Presbytery for the purpose of helping the Dakota Presbytery understand the final report and action of the Synod.