

SYNOD OF LAKES AND PRAIRIES
ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW TASK FORCE
ON THE FUTURE OF THE SYNOD
FINAL REPORT

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This report is divided into four sections:

- Charge of the Task Force
- A Socio-Historical Introduction
- Comments and Recommendations from the Task Force for the future of the Synod of Lakes and Prairies, and,
- Conclusion.

I Charge of the Task Force

In its January 2009 meeting the commissioners of the Synod approved a recommendation from the Steering Committee that an administrative review task force be named to consider the role of the Synod as the church emerges into the future. The task force was initially convened in August 2009.

II A Socio-Historical Introduction

Since the formation of the Synod of Lakes and Prairies in 1973, enormous shifts in the societal structures of this regional synod have amounted to nothing less than a slow but dramatic tectonic shift in the substrata of our foundation. We have identified these challenges facing us:

- Almost half of our Presbyterian membership has disappeared;
- Fully two thirds of the present membership did not grow up Presbyterian;
- Once powerful ecumenical engagements, mission involvements, comity agreements and shared ministries are in a state of collapse;
- Covenant agreements and relationships involving our retirement homes, camps and conference centers, college and seminaries are vague shadows of the mutually reinforcing institutional structures they once were;
- Sources of funding which once flowed like the Mighty Mississippi to resource our mission, ministries, and labors within our borders have become a shallow variegated stream like the Platte;
- Regional communications and technological systems to deliver information and unite governing bodies have altered dramatically from postal delivery, telephone, mimeograph and offset press systems to globalized paperless computerized systems, cell phones, web-sites and social networking;
- The social, business, and economic homogeneity factors which logically formed the present synod boundaries no longer exist;
- A changing educational hierarchy, added to a precipitous decline in membership and participation, has resulted in a peculiar set of circumstances whereby the Presbyteries in our Synod find themselves facing a world that resembles first century Christianity in terms of a mission field, and completely uncharted territory in terms of opportunities for doing mission;
- As we focused our efforts to manage the growth in our congregations over the previous few decades, we may have neglected the spiritual growth and development of our people;
- The healthy connectional system existing between sessions, presbyteries, synods and general assembly is frayed and devalued at best and dysfunctional at worst;
- Congregations are shifting their mission giving from presbyteries, synods and the General Assembly to giving to specific local and international mission projects for which they have a passion.

We have also found these opportunities facing us:

- Leaner membership could be trained to respond to world needs
- A more teachable, reachable membership could be cultivated without reference to politics and archaic agendas.

- 48 • With more denominational dividing walls being down, greater creativity and new responsive structures
49 could arise that have greater flexibility to emerging needs.
- 50 • Opportunity for re-imagining new co-beneficial relationships rather than co-dependencies could be
51 developed by naming what needs and benefits could emerge from a newly defined relationship that
52 acknowledges new independent realities.
- 53 • Opportunity to clarify and refocus those things that must be done with current limited resources; enlarge
54 mission interpretive grids to new and innovative sources of funding.
- 55 • Use new technologies to provide greater opportunities for skilled and honed communications with
56 faster dialogic response methods.
- 57 • Renewed opportunity to engage in conversation about who, what, when, where, why, and how we establish
58 mutually beneficial relationships with one another.
- 59 • Provide opportunities to think globally, act locally, opening ourselves up to the transforming work of the
60 Spirit.
- 61 • Reclaim our commitment not only equipping but also nurturing and developing strong disciples.

62 Our study has shown that during this whole process of tectonic shifting, the Synod of Lakes and Prairies has been
63 blessed with leaders who have helped make at least three major adjustments to creatively and energetically redeploy
64 personnel, reorganize funding systems, reform governance responsibilities and refocus our ministry and mission in
65 order to meet these changing realities within the Synod, Presbyteries and sessions. Consequently, the Synod of
66 Lakes and Prairies has remained a model in our denomination for healthy, effective, and efficient ministries on
67 behalf of Jesus Christ for our Presbyteries.

68 In addition, while covenant relationships with the various institutions of mission within the Synod need to be re-
69 created for the 21st century to address the mutual benefits and commitments of continuing to be connected, the
70 Synod is blessed currently by relationships with Presbyterian Homes, colleges and universities, camp and campus
71 ministries and others, to make it possible and desirable to engage the process.

72 The Task Force has come to the conclusion that we cannot rest upon these past successful accomplishments and we
73 are convinced that what our Task Force has researched and recommends now to the Synod may take more than
74 merely another set of readjustments to meet the growing pressures dramatically shifting the ground under our feet at
75 the present time.

76 Our studies, deliberations, and recommendations in this report are based on certain values we hold. We gratefully
77 acknowledge the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in helping us to understand, identify, and articulate these guiding
78 values.

- 79 • Partnerships - Forming and maintaining partnerships between Presbyteries, and those between Presbyteries
80 and Synod, as well as ecumenical partnerships establishes the basis for us to work together to achieve
81 common goals and increase the strength and effectiveness of our ministry and mission.
- 82 • Discipleship – Develop disciples by providing opportunities to grow more deeply in our faith, encouraging
83 a more faithful body of Presbyterian Christians.
- 84 • Gifts and Vocation - Our reformed tradition maintains that each individual is gifted to contribute to God’s
85 kingdom; and we believe an emphasis on structure and policy that encourages informed decision making
86 and identifies and empowers the gifts of those elected to serve across the Synod will strengthen our mission
87 and ministry.
- 88 • Education – A significant function of the Synod for this time is to provide excellent, culturally relevant, and
89 convenient training to those engaged in the mission and work of our Presbyterian tradition.
- 90 • Flexibility - The structure and policies of our Synod must be readily responsive to changing needs and
91 requests of our Presbyteries and the ever changing context within which our churches strive to sustain, and
92 hopefully thrive, in their ministry and mission.

- 93 • Interpersonal Relationships – In a desire to move beyond an “us vs. them” mindset, we value the
94 importance of interpersonal relationships that “build one another up” in the words of St. Paul, strengthen
95 one another, and engender trust to help us work together in unity.

96 After several meetings with extensive conversation and reflection; interviews with current and former staff,
97 seminary students and faculty; and input from presbytery councils and staff, what follows are our findings and
98 recommendations for moving this Synod forward in the 21st Century with a reinvigorated and re-visioning
99 leadership cadre at work throughout our presbyteries and sessions.

100 **III Comments and Recommendations from the Task Force for the Future of the Synod of Lakes and Prairies**

101 The analogy of the seed and the various kinds of soil that Jesus shares with his disciples in the gospels seems
102 applicable to the ministry of the Synod of Lakes and Prairies. While we, as disciples, do not cause spiritual growth,
103 we are called to *work the soil* and thus, intentionally address ways to nurture an environment that is conducive to
104 spiritual growth. The heart of this report addresses how we can best prepare the soil in this Synod, so that we are
105 growing in faith and witness in this world, joining in God’s transforming work, while abiding in and working
106 alongside our *Master Gardener*, Jesus Christ.

107 For us to address this changing face of our denomination as well as the changing face of the mission field with
108 which we are engaged, we must acknowledge the transitions our Presbyteries are moving through, that some of
109 those transitions look alike and some are unique to a particular Presbytery’s geography and population.

110 **Creating a Nimble Synod**

111 The Synod must acknowledge and become adept at leading and functioning with a multi-dimensional kind of
112 nimbleness and flexibility.

113 From a structural and operational perspective, we offer these four recommendations:

- 114 • That the Synod Assembly designate an entity to act on its behalf to take any action that may be needed
115 between meetings of the commissioners.
- 116 • That the Synod Assembly designate an entity to intentionally engage in an ongoing process of identifying
117 needs and concerns in our presbyteries with recommendations for the Synod to address them. This might
118 be accomplished through a body consisting of representatives from our presbyteries.
- 119 • That the Synod Staff be responsible for researching and identifying best practices in addressing identified
120 needs and concerns. Research would include looking at practices both within and outside our Synod, within
121 and outside our denomination, as well as developing our own creative solutions.
- 122 • That the Synod Assembly designate the Synod Personnel Committee to be responsible for ongoing review
123 of staffing design to ensure that the configuration of the staff is meeting the changing functions and projects
124 of the Synod. This will support a flexible staff that is able to work across functional lines. This
125 organizational development work would be accomplished in collaboration with the Synod Executive.

126 These recommendations, along with the development and use of technology, especially distance technology, to aid
127 in dialogue leading to decision making among commissioners, could result in the need for fewer face to face
128 meetings. The Synod Assembly may therefore wish to consider reducing the number of meetings it holds each year.

129 **Equipping Servant Leadership**

130 From the perspective of equipping the saints, one of the significant changes we see in how the Synod interacts with
131 its Presbyteries is that instead of Synod Staff gathering people in a place to learn, Synod Staff will go to the people,
132 meeting them in their locale so they can learn in the places they live, work, and minister. The learning experience
133 will take place mostly in the same geography where the mission and ministry is done. This training will take place in
134 any form deemed most appropriate, i.e. face to face, web based delivery methods, distance education tools, and any
135 number of ways technology will make possible.

136 We expect these learning opportunities not to be limited to lay persons and ruling elders in Presbyteries. We have
137 come to understand that continuing education for Ministers of Word and Sacrament (teaching elders) directed
138 toward understanding cultural differences (both age group culture and racial/ethnic culture), technology, and a
139 changing mission field are critical for our congregations to survive and to thrive in the church of a new day.
140 Distance education may be one significantly important way to overcome barriers to making this continuing

141 education possible. Our research demonstrates that the seminary within our bounds, Dubuque Theological Seminary,
142 is already utilizing this technology; and we found them to be enthusiastic about possible partnerships with the Synod
143 to make it more broadly applicable.

144 It is clear to us that most, and perhaps all, of our presbyteries feel the strong need for leadership by Ministers of
145 Word and Sacrament and Elders at all levels of governance, mission and ministry. Yet the extent of leadership
146 training conducted in churches and/or presbyteries ranges from extensive to very little. A variety of training
147 programs for leaders could be provided online, in partnership with any of our colleges and universities. Dubuque has
148 already begun some work in this regard and may serve as an initial primary partner.

149 Possible courses could be in the areas of leadership, stewardship, what it means to be Presbyterian, Presbyterian
150 polity, compensation and benefits, negotiations between a PNC and a pastor, personnel practices, visioning and
151 strategic planning, Elder and Deacon training, financial planning for a church, and financial planning for a pastor,
152 among others.

153 The Task Force recommends that the Synod determine the cost and feasibility of such a model for continuing
154 education and leadership training and, if feasible, develop a work group to implement such opportunities consisting
155 of Synod staff, presbyters and/or congregants from presbyteries and personnel from Dubuque Seminary.

156 Perhaps a clear way of explaining our recommendations is to provide examples of how we envision the Synod
157 effectively working with the various *soils* found in our region. Each of these examples would arise from an
158 identified need.

159 • New Form of Government (nFOG): If extensive changes in the *Book of Order* (nFOG - new Form of
160 Government) are approved by the General Assembly in 2012, the Form of Government section will be
161 much less prescriptive, freeing the presbyteries to develop answers to questions and processes formerly
162 dictated by the this section of the *Book of Order*. Governing bodies (referred to as councils in the nFOG
163 document) will have much more discretion and responsibility in developing and implementing processes,
164 definitions and for resolving issues that have heretofore been stipulated by the *Book of Order*. The Synod
165 can add real value to presbyteries in this time of transition by identifying those areas that will raise the most
166 concerns, questions and controversy and then helping presbyteries to develop responses to each. This can
167 be done in two ways: (1) By offering in depth consultation which includes specific approaches for
168 responding to those changes, along with potential implications of these approaches, and (2) by being
169 prepared to respond to questions from presbyteries as they encounter situations that used to be covered by
170 the *Book of Order* but are no longer specifically addressed in the revised Form of Government.

171 This role would require that Synod commissioners, along with presbytery and synod staff persons, be
172 deeply grounded in the philosophy and practice of the foundations of Presbyterianism. The Synod could
173 play an educative role here in helping these persons gain a deeper understanding of Presbyterian
174 foundations.

175 Each governing body, or council, will need to develop more inclusive manuals of operations to codify the
176 processes to be used in governance, ministry and mission going forward into the future. The Synod could
177 add considerable value here as well by developing a manual of operations for its own functions and by
178 providing opportunities for extensive consultation with presbyteries for developing models for presbyteries
179 to use in drafting their own manuals. There may be a need for somewhat different models to cover the
180 variances from one presbytery to another.

181 • Dwindling Communities / Dwindling Churches: A need that could arise as the body gets together to discern
182 needs is one regarding dwindling communities and churches in various areas of the Synod. One possible
183 way to address this need would be for Synod Staff to build relationships with our ecumenical partners to
184 identify ways we can effectively guide presbyteries as they guide rural congregations that face these
185 challenges. How can a Christian presence continue in a community that is facing such change? What
186 resources can the Synod provide so that rural ministries can continue shining the light of Christ in their
187 communities? These are the questions that might be asked and could be anticipated by the Synod to be
188 addressed.

189 • Multi-Cultural Ministry: This is an area of ministry that faces every church. How can the Synod resource
190 presbyteries to help congregations understand the various cultures that currently exist within their particular
191 churches as well as to be attentive to the needs of various cultures present in their communities, with whom

192 they have no ministry to at the present time? How could the Synod equip the presbyteries to be more
193 effective in nurturing discipleship among young adults? How could the Synod help us see our communities
194 as they really are demographically and guide us to respond to spiritual needs around us? Again, these are
195 the questions that might be asked and could be anticipated by the Synod to be addressed.

196 We see the Synod as a body which identifies needs, and then moves forward to address needs, *working the soil* to
197 promote spiritual growth. With continuing changing needs, topics to address would continue to change as well. We
198 have intentionally not made specific recommendations with regard to how the Synod lives into this nimble, flexible
199 way of being. We trust the Synod Assembly to design and implement a process for this transition that both
200 appreciates and capitalizes on the gifts and abilities of the Synod Staff to help become this more agile body.

201 We strongly underscore the need for some of the Synod's current learning opportunities to continue on a periodic
202 basis, i.e. COM/CPM training events where resource people from outside our geography are engaged to help us
203 think about broader topics, and Synod School where community and relationship building are part of the
204 discipleship learning experience.

205 **Interpersonal Relationships**

206 From the perspective of nurturing an environment that is conducive to spiritual growth, we have come to understand
207 the critical importance of growing in love, trust, and unity within the body of Christ. The value of interpersonal
208 relationships is paramount, such that we recommend this to be a goal with every event sponsored by the Synod.

209 Tools and means for encouraging interpersonal relationships are numerous and new technologies will help us
210 enhance the relationships that are required to be a faithful witness. It is incumbent upon a nimble Synod to
211 incorporate these technologies as they emerge into the working life of the staff and the assembly.

212 We believe an exciting opportunity to consider organizing at the Synod level is educational and missional
213 travel. Travel is inherently conducive to building community and relationships, thus we recommend it be considered
214 as a means to enhance both learning opportunities as well as interpersonal relationships. Imagine taking a group of
215 newly ordained clergy to Geneva, Scotland or Israel!

216 **Presbyterian Foundations - Remembering Our Roots**

217 With God's help, the Synod of Lakes and Prairies has faced challenges and welcomed opportunities that have come
218 through the process of cultural tectonic shifting through the years. As we continue to listen for the Spirit of God to
219 guide us through tremendous cultural shifts, we recognize the value of our foundational principles, which are found
220 in the first four chapters of the current Book of Order and are virtually all preserved in the revised Foundations of
221 Presbyterian Polity. As we intentionally focus on current needs and identify ways to respond to these needs, the
222 foundational principles will keep us grounded in what we, as Presbyterians, bring to the Church.

223 Due to the changing culture, the mechanisms by which we have described Presbyterianism up until now, such as
224 catechisms, church school instruction, and home discussion, to name a few, are no longer as commonplace, nor do
225 they resonate in the same ways they once did. Because of this change, there are persons in many different
226 generational segments across the denomination who do not understand, and therefore cannot experience and build
227 upon, the relational richness that our polity makes possible.

228 The Synod could play a vital role in helping us find ways to return to our Presbyterian roots by partnering and
229 consulting with presbytery and denominational leaders, including seminary faculty and administrators, to think
230 creatively about how to make accessible to Presbyteries the deep connections among our confessions, polity
231 principles, and theological understandings and practices. These deep connections, based on God's covenantal
232 relationship with us, inform our covenantal relationships with one another, and our mission and ministry in this
233 world so that the tenants of our denomination are both understood and internalized with the result that members live
234 out their faith more richly and intentionally. This would add transformational value and make a substantial
235 difference going forward.

236 If nFOG is approved "The Foundation of Presbyterian Polity" section found at the beginning of the nFOG document
237 can be used as an opportunity for us to engage our congregations in the essential elements of Presbyterian belief and
238 practice and the ways in which this practice informs being a disciple of Christ.

239 **Shared Services Among Presbyteries and Synods**

240 We recommend that the Synod take a leadership role to identify the areas where service can be shared between one
241 or more presbyteries or between one or more synods to improve efficiency without decreasing effectiveness where it
242 is so important to conserve resources. This includes the ways the Synod is already in partnership with Presbyteries
243 and other governing bodies such as bookkeeping and payroll, stated clerk functions, loan funds, Ministry
244 Development Center and Resource Center partnerships.

245 **Covenant Relationship**

246 We recommend the Synod Assembly appoint groups who are able to adequately study, understand, and evaluate the
247 various organizations with which we currently have covenant relationships to determine if any should be
248 discontinued or amended (Presbyterian Clearwater Forest, Presbyterian Homes, Hillcrest Family Services, Higher
249 Education, etc.).

250 Because we value the interpersonal relationship between the synod staff and our presbyteries, we encourage the
251 presbyteries to invite a synod staff person to be with the presbytery at least once a year.

252 **V Conclusion**

253 Through our months of study, conversation and discernment, we have come to better understand the myriad of
254 changes in our world that pose challenges as well as opportunities for the ministry of the Synod of Lakes and
255 Prairies. Throughout the process we have continued to recognize the Synod as facing these changes from a position
256 of health. It is for this reason, that we affirm the present work of the Synod and recommend continuing many of the
257 programs that are already being offered. We make our recommendations with confidence that the resources that
258 have made this a good Synod, will be beneficial in facing the changes that are required now.

259 We appreciate the opportunity to have served on this Synod Administrative Review Task Force. We were not given
260 a simple task, yet, we have appreciated the opportunity to study, struggle and seek. Through the process, we have
261 come to recognize the various gifts we each brought to the table and have grown as we have listened to one another,
262 struggled together and tried to discern the direction this report was to take. Now, we turn our “end” product over to
263 you, trusting that it will provide a beginning point as you prayerfully read, discern and listen for the movement of
264 the Holy Spirit within your conversations as you move toward creative implementation.

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