

**Addendum to the “Final Report of the Administrative Review Task  
Force on the Future of the Synod”  
Submitted by Harry Hoyt**

I have been a member of the above task force and have participated in the final report, however, I would like to make some further comment for the consideration of the Synod Steering Committee and Synod Assembly. I offer these comments below as an addendum to the "Final Report."

The “Final Report of the Administrative Review Task Force on the Future of the Synod” (Hereinafter called the "Final Report") contains a number of recommendations that will make a difference if implemented and I think they should be considered seriously. However, I think they will not make the major difference well into the future that some may have wished for. Such change will take more intentional and courageous action.

For that kind of change consideration should be given to employing a process similar to the one used in East Iowa Presbytery beginning about ten years ago. This was between General Presbyters and just before Harry Olthoff joined the staff. There was a strong feeling that the presbytery was in need of major change to move successfully into an uncertain future. I am sensing that the Synod is in a similar situation. In response the Presbytery voted to discontinue every committee, board, task force, commission and every other body that had been formed over the years except those committees and commissions mandated by the *Book of Order*. This fairly radical change made some people very nervous because it meant the Presbytery had lost structure and practice that staff and volunteers had counted on for years and that made it easy to make decision without always evaluating the need for what was being proposed and/or assigning a priority and/or the most effective allocation of resources.

Shortly after that Harry Olthoff assumed the position of General Presbyter. He embraced the concept and the process of rebuilding or “resetting” the Presbytery was begun. The Presbytery went through a process similar to what occurs when there is the need to unplug a modem, smart phone or some other electronic device when it isn’t functioning well, so it can reset and/or reconfigure itself. The staff and volunteers have been innovating ever since. It forced Presbytery leaders to be very intentional about how they configured and utilized all resources available to do the business of the Presbytery. The staff and volunteers were, and still are, able to move more quickly with less structure to navigate from concept to actualization. At first there were a number of questions from all quarters that forced leadership to rethink what the Presbytery really needed to do and how it needed to do it.

It forced the leaders to think strategically rather than taking the easy way out of making decisions based on “doing what we have always done.” Major changes were made in what things were done, how they were done and staffing to meet new challenges. The staffing model is still working successfully to accomplish what is determined to be the high priority items first. The model tends to be very flexible and enables staff members to make decisions in collaboration with volunteers and each other. In the case of COM,

which is a large committee, a leadership team was formed where staff and COM leaders partner to make decisions on a large number of issues and to discuss strategies beyond the immediate issue(s) at hand.

There is substantial use of electronic communication to keep committee members informed. Right now the Presbytery web site and e-mail are the main tools but as technology brings us new innovations, communication will shift to what is most effective. The same degree of confidentiality attaches to receiving information via e-mail as in a meeting. Questions are asked and answered in many cases before a scheduled meeting takes place. In other cases it makes waiting for the next meeting to take the needed action, say for a church, unnecessary. All of what is written above does not work perfectly but it functions much better than it used to and better than it would have had the Presbytery not reset. This is especially important with decreasing resources. The Presbytery is doing more now than it used to with a budget that is much lower, when adjusted for inflation, than it was 10 years ago or even one year ago.

If the Synod Assembly is serious about the need to rethink what we need to do at the Synod level and how to set up the flow of activity to accomplish the tasks, this would be the bold step that would force that to happen. It would have to be fleshed out with more detail and it would lead to a reconfigured staff model. This could take place over time but could be painful if not done well. The point would be to question and rethink our foundational relationships with our presbyteries and other covenantal partners and reorder them in relation to the ever changing contexts we, and our partners, experience.

The "Final Report" contains three recommendations for the Synod to be more responsive to presbytery needs and to make it more nimble. One is a recommendation that a group populated by persons from presbyteries be established to determine what presbyteries need, how the Synod should respond, and then make recommendations to the Synod Assembly. The second is to recommend that the Synod Personnel Committee design the staffing model to accomplish what the Assembly approves from this group. I am skeptical that this will be successful without forcing the system to "reset," much like some pieces of electronic gear must do to keep operating properly.

A third proposed recommendation is to establish a group that can make decisions for the Assembly between Assembly meetings. For this to be fully effective the decisions would have to move well beyond those decisions that would have things done as they always have been. The group would have to have authority and encouragement to be innovative and would have to collaborate with staff to determine what needs to be done, set priorities and find better ways to organize staff and volunteers to do it

The expectation of the Synod Assembly may be that one task force can and will develop one best plan for the Synod to operate well into the future. This may have been the expectation for the above task force among some. In my view, such an expectation is unrealistic. In reality, we don't have enough information to do that with a reasonable degree of certainty and are unable to see that far into the future with great clarity. The recommendations that have been presented in the Final Report are positive steps for

improvement but they are an overlay on top of the current structure and staffing model. The more effective approach would be to implement a structure that forces the Synod to reset itself and then allows it to continually evaluate how and where it should operate as time presents new and changing contexts in which each of our presbyteries and those with which we are in covenant relationship must operate.

The argument against this is that we are one of the most successful synods in the denomination and we should not be taking risks with that record. That is a strong argument and will appeal to a broad cross section of our Synod population. However, being “one of the most successful” is a relative concept and only compares us with others who are doing worse. It does not take into account that we are losing traction, just not at the same rate as others. East Iowa Presbytery was also one of the best presbyteries in the Synod. It seems clear that the presbytery is in a better place than it would have been had it not taken this bold step. To continue being successful the presbytery will have to keep evolving into the future and may find a time when it would be best for it to again reset.