

**REPORT TO THE SYNOD OF THE TRINITY – FALL 2015
MID-COUNCIL TASK GROUP ON GENERAL ASSEMBLY DECISION 05-04
(ON A NEW CONFIGURATION OF SYNOD BOUNDARIES)**

Preface:

The Synod of the Trinity (the “Synod”) has prayerfully and thoughtfully undergone a process to discern how to respond to the 221st General Assembly (2014) decision 05-04, which directed that: “a new configuration of synod boundaries be established [based on an emerging sense of purpose, partnership, context, and call] through a collaborative process between the synods and presbyteries resulting in no more than 10-12 synods.”

We have been working for the last two years to create an environment of cooperation within the Synod and among our 16 member presbyteries. We have cooperatively defined what we believe the Synod should be and do, and as a result, we have defined aspirational goals (which we call our “Ends”) for working not just within the bounds of our Synod, but also as the Church at large.

As a result of this work, and in light of the General Assembly’s action, the Synod of the Trinity established a Task Group comprised of ten leaders from around the Synod. This Task Group was asked to:

- 1) Listen deeply to our Synod Commissioners and the leaders of our member presbyteries to understand how they use Synod resources; how they cooperate with one another in ministry and mission; how they are affected by existing presbytery and synod boundaries; and what benefits and drawbacks would be experienced by redrawing presbytery and/or synod boundaries. We also asked them to share whatever additional thoughts about this subject they felt were important to their experience.
- 2) Synthesize the responses to develop a recommendation to the Synod and to the Transitional Synod Executive as she works with other synod executives around the PCUSA to determine how best to respond to GA decision 05-04.

Process and timeline:

The Task Group was convened in December 2014, and met together in January 2015 to determine how to undertake the work. At that meeting, it was decided that the group would focus on the purpose, partnership, context and call aspects of the mandate, and focus on listening to see if there were opportunities that might lead to mergers within existing presbyteries, of presbyteries across existing synod boundaries, or among synods themselves.

The Task Group agreed that each member would work with two or three presbyteries, meeting with the respective presbytery executive and their executive councils in whatever configuration made sense for the presbytery. During the ensuing months, the Task Group

members met with the presbytery leaders [in 14 of the 16 presbyteries] to gather feedback. There was additional discussion with Synod Commissioners at the March and June 2015 Synod Assembly meetings and with the Synod Executive Advisory Team in May 2015. Further meetings were held with commissioners and with the Synod's Executive Forum (comprised of the Synod's executive presbyters), and with Warren Cooper, a member of our Synod who was a member of both the 1st and 2nd Mid-Council Task Groups of the General Assembly.

Additionally, during this time period the Synod of the Trinity's leaders held conversations with our neighbor, the Synod of the Covenant, to discuss areas for mutual ministry, including intercultural ministry and human trafficking. The Synod Executive also met with the Executives of the Synod of the Northeast and the Synod of the MidAtlantic. We look forward to future conversation and partnership with them to understand what we have in common in mission and ministry to determine how best to work collaboratively in the interests of the Church.

Feedback:

While it is not the intention to reiterate all the feedback the Task Group and executive leadership team have received, several themes emerged:

1. All of the Synod's member presbyteries use Synod resources to some extent. The presbyteries appreciate the synod's grant-making abilities, although they are used to different extents in different places, and perhaps are not as widely known as we would like. Presbyteries also appreciate the support and general helpfulness of the Synod staff.
2. The most frequently mentioned inter-presbytery ministries related to camp and conference ministry and mission partnerships. There was also a general sense that continuing education is a shared ministry that can benefit from increased Synod resources; and an appreciation for the Synod's ability to gather people together for shared COM/CPM training, the Executive Presbyter Forum, and for things such as PJC and stated clerk training. Several mentioned that they miss "Synod School," our former annual summer education event for presbyteries and congregations in the synod.
3. The presbyteries do not generally see geographic boundaries as limitations to their ministry. When it makes sense, churches within and across presbyteries join with other churches, and presbyteries join together for learning, mission and fellowship. Some members described difficulty in sharing certain types of resources across borders, though this seemed limited. An example is the use of supply preachers who have been approved in one presbytery and not another. The conversations gave presbyteries an opportunity to express hopes for the future as well as criticisms of the Synod. The distance between presbyteries and travel time to meetings was consistently noted as a challenge.
4. The Task Group did not discover great enthusiasm among presbyteries to redraw synod (or presbytery) lines, although presbyteries indicated that the Synod should

continue to help facilitate cooperation among the presbyteries, both inside and outside current Synod boundaries.

Many of our conversations were deeply valuable and introspective; that said, as in all organizations, tensions exist among various levels of church hierarchy, whether between congregations and their presbytery or between presbyteries and their synod, and not every meeting engendered the kind of response we had hoped. Some individuals and presbyteries value the contributions and role of the Synod more than others, while some are simply unaware of many of the ways that synods contribute to the ministries and mission of the PCUSA, in our Synod or elsewhere.

Conclusion:

Briefly put, our conversations with our member presbyteries and neighboring synods did not indicate the need for a plan for changing the boundaries of this Synod, and so we do not recommend developing such a plan. These conversations did, however, lead us more deeply into affirmation of our Synod Ends. In our consultations, we found that our work of “support[ing] and challeng[ing] member Presbyteries to be vital, innovative and faithful in their collaborative and distinctive callings” (the Synod’s defined “Primary End”) is succeeding in ways that – lacking compelling missional reasons to do so – could be undermined by efforts to reconfigure our Synod boundaries. We welcome the opportunity to expand partnerships and especially to make any current boundaries – whether between presbyteries or synods – more porous and easier to navigate for the purposes of more effective mission and ministry.

We lift up three highlights of this process:

1. The affirmation of the importance of relationships to the members of our presbyteries- both within and beyond their own boundaries. These relationships are multiform and continue to evolve, but we believe they are not yet firm enough to merit or withstand any boundary-shifting process.
2. The Synod of the Trinity – whether in its current configuration or in partnership with others – has valuable roles to play for its member presbyteries, particularly in facilitating new relationships of ministry and mission regardless of geographical or other boundaries. Financial and professional support is even more critical in light of diminishing resources within our presbyteries.
3. Our Task Group believes strongly that continuing to spend significant resources of time and money seeking mergers or reconfigurations of councils in the PCUSA for any reasons other than to specifically enhance our ministry and mission is not in the best interest of the Church. Additionally, any church-wide reorganization should include all levels of church councils, as suggested in the report from the Mid-Council I Commission.