

Report of the Mid-Council Task Group
Synod of the Trinity
June 5, 2015

Friends in Christ:

In response 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,” the Synod of the Trinity appointed a task group to engage in this effort.

We began with a thorough exploration of the parameters of the task, realizing early on that one Synod can only do so much with regard to redefining the configuration and number of all 16 Synods. So rather than begin to re-draw maps and boundaries, we decided to focus our energy on the bracketed sentence regarding “an emerging sense of purpose, partnership, context, and call.” In conjunction with our Synod’s work around our new “policy governance,” it was clear to us early on that our Synod has a sense of *purpose* (largely, facilitating and assisting the ministries of its member Presbyteries and congregations), creative and dynamic *partnerships* with other Synods and Presbyteries, a variety of different ministry *contexts* (including several different cultural contexts) and an always emerging sense of *call* to be God’s people in unique ways within those contexts.

So from the beginning, rather than seeing the General Assembly decision as a “threat” to the life of our Synod, we attempted to look at it as an opportunity to better understand both the actual and the potential ministries of the Synod of the Trinity, and to explore possibilities for partnering more substantially with neighboring Synods.

We decided to pursue our next phase of work through conversations:

- With each of our member Presbyteries – At this point, Task Group members have met and/or consulted with representatives from all () of our Presbyteries.
- With Synod representatives at our regular Synod meetings – At round-table discussions at the (February) meeting of Synod, and again at the June meeting.
- With Warren Cooper, a member of our Synod, who was also a member of the 1st and 2nd Mid-Council Task Forces of the General Assembly.
- Between and among our Presbytery Executives.
- With the Synod Executive Advisory Team in May, where a more specific discussion about potential synod mergers and boundaries led to a deeper conversation about opportunities available to us now.
- With at least some of our neighboring Synods – One conversation is on the calendar; others remain yet to be arranged.

In addition, and separate from our work, synod executives have held conversations last August and in May of this year, reflecting at least partly on how their synods have interpreted and addressed the GA mandate.

The questions we initially decided to ask were:

1. *How are you currently using Synod resources?* We wanted to know both how aware folks are of the resources our Synod offers, and also to find out ways of which even Synod staff might not be aware that these resources are being utilized.
2. *What are the ministries in your Presbytery that are shaped by relationships with people in other Presbyteries?* Our hope here was to discover both relationships that happen between Presbyteries within the Synod of the Trinity, and also those shaped across Synod boundaries.
3. *How does our Synod geography limit or enhance our ministry and mission?* It was our sense that culture, perhaps more than geography, affects the way our member Presbyteries and congregations look for partnerships. Yet in an effort to truly honor the mandate of the General Assembly, we wanted to know whether our current boundaries make sense, or whether some other more “organic” boundaries with neighboring Synods might emerge that would enable new ministry and mission.
4. *What else would you like to share?* The “wildcard” question that we hoped might open the door for possibilities we hadn’t considered.

After some early conversations and task group consultation, we added the question:

5. *What might be some advantages for a possible “redrawing” of Synod and/or Presbytery boundaries?*

A few examples of the responses we received to these questions are:

1. Currently using Synod resources:
 - Use of Synod funds for new ministry initiatives
 - Presbytery staff grateful for help and resources from Synod staff
 - Small church Leadership fund
 - Reviewing minutes
 - Help with EP search process
 - Funding for increase in Major Medical for those with dependents
 - COM/CPM events = very helpful
 - Legal assistance
 - Campus ministry
 - Help with expediting ministry candidates
 - *Synod School (no longer held) was mentioned in several meetings*
2. Ministries in our Presbytery that are shaped by relationships with other Presbyteries:
 - Cooperative camp programs
 - Christian educator retreats/training
 - Lay-pastors network
 - Mission partnerships (eg. Sudan, The Shack)
 - Mission/ work camp trips – esp. WVMAW (most participants are from PA

- churches)
 - Presbyterian Media Mission
 - New pastor training (in the past)
 - Pittsburgh Seminary as a regional asset
- 3. How does our Synod geography limit or enhance our ministry and mission?
 - Long distances to Synod events for many Presbyteries
 - Similarities and differences in regional culture and history may be more impactful than physical geography
 - *Several conversations revolved around the idea that boundaries of entities such as Synods are less meaningful each year, both from a sense of advances in communications that enable us to be more “global,” and also due to a lack of understanding about what resources Synods provide.*
CHAIR’S NOTE: This suggests the Synod of the Trinity may need to do a better job of marketing itself – letting folks know what we do and what is available. It also is consistent with the larger idea that whatever we can do to make such boundaries easier for our Presbyteries to bridge, the better it will be for shared and dynamic ministry.
- 4. What else would you like to share:
 - Presbyteries resourcing each other
 - “Synod always meets in PA – won’t accept our hospitality.” “It’s twice as far from Pittsburgh to Charleston as from Charleston to Pittsburgh.”
 - Need assistance with E.P. searches & trouble-shooting
 - Change is needed at GA level more than Synod
- 5. What might be some advantages for a possible “redrawing” of Synod and/or Presbytery boundaries? *(Note: some consultations were held prior to framing this question)*
 - A sense that values might change dramatically
 - Generally there was *no* support for the idea of redefining such boundaries. Many saw this as a waste of time and effort, and a focus on the wrong questions/problems.

The responses provided few surprises, except perhaps for the overall lack of enthusiasm for considering new boundaries, even within Presbyteries on the borders of neighboring Synods. There was, however, widespread consensus that all such boundaries – which may be necessary for administrative purposes – ought to be made more “porous” in order to facilitate cooperation and partnerships. One specific example included simplifying the process of sharing pulpit supply between neighboring Presbyteries in different Synods.

SUMMARY:

As chair of this Task Group, I confess that at this time our consultation with presbyteries has not pushed us towards drawing maps of potential alternative boundaries, sending overtures to adjoining Synods, offering some kind of merger arrangement, nor examining ways to arrange “trades” of member Presbyteries. Although we certainly recognize that border presbyteries, or even regions of

presbyteries might potentially seek new affiliations--either away from, or in addition to the Synod of the Trinity. Further, Synod to Synod conversations taking place this summer with our border Synods may breed some new possibilities. But at this time, what we have discovered/discerned in our process, instead, is that a potential realignment/reduction in the number of Synods took a backseat to our conversations about connecting across boundaries. In this, I believe we have fulfilled the spirit of the GA overture, and in so doing, have truly gained some new clarity through the conversations. It is my hope that both our Synod and the GA will appreciate the process we have followed to this point, and consider ways to forge new partnerships and cooperation across and in spite of boundaries, to seek ways - when and where appropriate - to make those boundaries more porous in service to the ministry of God's people in the Synod of the Trinity... and everywhere.

Respectfully submitted,

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Mid-Council Task Group Chair