

“Communion & Conversation”
Albuquerque, New Mexico, February 14-16, 2007
Sponsored by the Task Force on the Vision and Viability of Middle Governing Bodies
Summary Statement
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Coordinator of Governing Body Relations Gary Torrens’ paper asks “Is There A Presbytery Crunch?” which is described in these middle governing bodies as an increase in the complexity of the work met by a decrease in the resources to do that work. Yes, there is a crunch but it is far more than Presbyterian. Established denominations in the United States share deeply in this moment of crunch which is leading to conversations about “denominational reinvention” across many of those denominations. The conversations differ depending upon the size and the circumstance of the individual denominations. The February Albuquerque gathering of presbytery and synod executives, stated clerks, moderators, and national staff people provided a platform for a Presbyterian form of this widely shared dialogue.

What bring leaders together are the very real pressing problems that need to be solved. There are substantive questions of denominational structure that might include restructuring or downsizing; questions of the need to have executive presbyters in every presbytery; problems of raising money to support budgets and using dwindling budgets to support programs; issues of supplying clergy and resourcing the smallest of congregations; and, of course, personal questions of job security. As pressing as these problems are, pushing directly for answers and resolution of the tensions is the least helpful of the ways forward. The most pressing of the institutional problems to be faced in our longest established denominations are actually products of deep cultural and social changes for which our polity and practices born of an earlier day no longer serve well. The most faithful response is not to move quickly to finding solutions, developing new structures, or passing new legislation. To do so would be akin to passing more laws to add additional provisions to a federal tax code that is already rigid and out of control.

The February gathering in Albuquerque to “begin dialogue on the future of middle governing bodies” was an opportunity to take several steps:

- to draw a larger picture of the American religious landscape. Cultural value shifts and demographic drivers have impacted the role of mainline expressions of the Christian Faith. Generational values have changed. The emergence and dominance of larger congregations is new. Yet mainline denominational polity, practice, and models of congregation which were developed in an earlier time are not current with the needs and practices of this changed culture. We are limited by trying to do new work with old – and inappropriate – tools.
- to look at the challenge of leadership that requires us to move away from technical problem solving which is our greatest strength and to learn new ways to do adaptive work. The question is not whether the PCUSA should continue to have synods or require all presbyteries to have an executive. More helpfully the questions to be asked should explore what is the purpose of a particular synod or

- what is the needed outcome or product of a particular presbytery and what kind of leader would that presbytery need in order to accomplish its mission.
- to understand that systemic change for a denomination must, in this cultural moment, come from the bottom, not from the top. The situation is much too complex for changes in denominational polity or GA-wide agreements to be able to address the widely diverse and competing needs of all of the different regions of the country and the presbyteries and synods who live there. Change will come from the on-going daily practice of the executives and leaders who, in the necessity of their own experimentation will find ways ahead that the larger denomination could not have anticipated. The larger body can learn from the daily practice of the leaders who will need to find ways to be more adaptive and agile than ever before. And it is in this willingness to learn from local practice that our real hope lies for our large established national denominations to learn again how to speak to this changed culture.
 - to understand that, while it is the experimentation and risk of the daily practice of the clergy in the congregations and the executives and elected leaders in the middle governing bodies, systemic change does not happen in isolation. Leaders willing to learn and try new things need to be in covenant, in connection, and in communication with one another so that learning can spread.

There is much hope to claim at this moment. The group gathered in Albuquerque arrived, despite a daunting snowstorm, open to engage challenging ideas and deep conversation. This is difficult work since all of us who have lived our adult lives in established denominations come fully formed and normed in old assumptions and practices that make it difficult to see the new. It is natural, and healthy, that there was skepticism about change in the room and that skepticism would keep some from attending. Change comes from dialogue and shared practice and place must be given for all voices and experience to participate or to choose absence.

The group in Albuquerque also evidenced courage and risk. To depart without clear answers but with hope is an act of courage. It is a Mosaic moment of walking into the wilderness, knowing that leadership is needed, knowing that a vision is calling, but not clear about which way to walk tomorrow.

There is still much learning to do. A national gathering, such as the Albuquerque event, is critical. It provides a platform to bring attention to an issue. Change cannot happen without such national gatherings that intentionally offer learning and solicit dialogue rather than seek comforting but shallow changes. Nonetheless, such national gatherings are only one of the organizational and organizing tools needed for this time of change and such large gatherings are one of our older and better known tools that denominations will risk over using.