

General Assembly Council Executive Committee Retreat  
July 26-28, 2007

“Background for Discussion of the Future of Middle governing Bodies”  
(Paper originally written for the Expanded Staff Leadership Forum: April 16-18, 2007)

I have been asked to lead a discussion of the Communion and Conversation gathering that took place in Albuquerque, New Mexico, February 14-16, 2007. The General Assembly Council through the Task Force on the Vision and Viability of Middle Governing Bodies sponsored this gathering in response to a request from the Synod of the Southwest and the Presbyteries of Santa Fe and Sierra Blanca. The Middle Governing Body Connect website has a variety of articles, reflections, resources and audio from the gathering. I will attempt to put this meeting in the context of ongoing conversations, to summarize the meeting and to raise reflective questions for group discussion. Our discussion and a component on the future of middle governing bodies that is being designed as part of the Regional Benefits Conferences of the Board of Pensions are an outgrowth of the Communion and Conversation.

The Albuquerque meeting was the third in a series of conversations, beginning with the General Assembly Council and Middle Governing Body Executives in September 2006 in Louisville. Graham Hart, General Presbyter of Peace River Presbytery, led this group in an appreciative inquiry process to ask fundamental questions of vision, purpose, relationships and leadership. Paul Hooker, executive presbyter of St. Augustine Presbytery, led us into questions of identity, polity and praxis. Who are we called to be? What are we called to do? How are we called to do it? Paul offered three eschatological virtues for God’s new reality: humility, reconciliation and trust. Allison Seed, Moderator of the General Assembly Council, challenged the group through preaching, “...to lay at Christ’s feet our finely honed management skills, our theological competency, our powers of elocution with our hearts, souls, minds, weaknesses and vulnerabilities to serve Jesus Christ.” Paul Hooker, in his preaching said, “I think God is calling us to put down some earnest money on an ecclesiological grubstake, to put faith in a church that isn’t here yet, but is nonetheless the church where we ought to be.” The meeting concluded with a plan to continue conversations on ten topics through “Initiative Teams” that would meet electronically. The energy seems to have waned for these particular conversations.

The National Polity Conference convened in Tucson, Arizona, October 30- November 1, 2006. Through worship, plenary presentations and panel discussions, strategies for facing the future in middle governing bodies continued to surface. In her sermon, “Good Days and Bad Days”, Joan Gray, Moderator of the General Assembly, reminded participants that we are not the only actors in this story. God is still at work among us. Gary Torrens, Middle Governing Body Coordinator, moderated a panel of middle governing body leaders who are employing new strategies to respond to the decreasing resources and increasing complexity of the work of presbyteries and synods. Clark Cowden, evangelist Presbyter of San Joaquin Presbytery, described the current context as the breakdown of the regulatory model and posed the question to the leadership of the PC (U.S.A.), “Isn’t it the role of senior executive leadership to look into the

future, to find people who know how to transform denominational systems. Victoria Curtiss, a member of the Peace Unity and Purity Task Force, encouraged the group to avoid problem-solving-only approaches where polarities need to be balanced rather than fixed. A leadership team led a discussion of why we need a denomination. Participants identified new practices we need to develop to embrace the new future God intends for the PC (U.S.A.). The ideas included changing the church's language from management to theological, translating core theological language into language that will communicate with current generations and making creative use of emerging technologies.

In preparation for the "Communion and Conversation" in Albuquerque, participants received copies of Gil Rendle's books, Behavioral Covenants in Congregations and Leading Change in Congregations. Also participants received copies of papers that Gil wrote for the United Methodist Church. "Leadership Under Constraints: What Does It Mean to be asked for Leadership in a Managerial Institution" and "The Theological Task of Organizational Leadership" Most participants read or reread these resources and this created a common framework for the time together. The articles are posted on Middle governing Body Connect.

Gil assured the group that our conversation was part of a much larger conversation about "denominational reinvention" being carried on in all of the older, established denominations. The gathering included staff and elected folks from middle governing bodies and the General Assembly. The language for this conversation was "systems" language in which change can begin anywhere in the organization, but change inevitably affects every part of the system.

Gil affirmed the importance of managers as well as leaders in every living system. Management seeks the answer to the question, "Are we doing things right?" Managers assume there is a "right" way to do things and the appropriate strategy is to replicate what worked in the past. Leadership asks the question, "Are we doing the right thing?" Managers provide stability and leaders precipitate change. Leaders are often disruptive and challenge systems to think and learn.

Walter Bruggemann, Old Testament scholar and author was quoted:

The work of leadership is shaping the hopes and the fears of people. The hopes and fears are the positive and the negative energy flows that surge through people in times of great change. The task of the leader is to harness and direct the energy so that it flows with purpose and meaning.

Even though the group came together in response to the problem of declining resources and the inability to function as we have in the past, Gil reminded the group that problem solving would not be the most fruitful approach in changing circumstances. Realizing that many participants have been well trained to solve problems, Gil encouraged the group to ask better questions before seeking solutions. Gil posed the following three questions from his book, Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations:

1. Who are we? – A question of identity
2. What has God called us to do or be? – A question of purpose
3. Who is our neighbor? – A question of context

A component of the design was the formation of communities of practice. Participants were asked to self-select a small group with whom they would like to talk about important issues. The concept of communities of practice was developed by Etienne Wenger, researcher, consultant and author in 1998 to systematically address the kind of dynamic “knowing” that makes a difference in practice. It requires participation of people who are fully engaged in the process of creating, refining, communicating and using knowledge. A community of practice is a joint enterprise with a particular focus. Mutual engagement binds the members together. Shared resources, routines, sensibilities and vocabulary develop over time. Communities of practice develop around issues that matter to the people involved. Communities of practice are not a new kind of organizational unit. They are a different cut on the organization’s structure, which emphasizes the learning people have done together rather than the unit to which they report. We find other people to whom we can trust our hopes, fears, unfinished thoughts and embryonic ideas. In turn we must be trustworthy with all that is shared with us by other members of the group.

Wenger makes distinctions between communities of practice and other kinds of groups:

1. A community of practice is different from a business or functional unit in that it defines itself in the doing, as members develop among themselves their own understanding of what their practice is about.
2. A community of practice is different from a team in that shared learning and interest of its members are what keep it together.
3. A community of practice is different from a network in the sense that it is “about” something. It is not just a set of relationships. It has an identity as a community and thereby shapes the identity of its members.

Margaret Wheatley, consultant, speaker and Co-Founder of the Berkana Institute is dedicated to serving life-affirming leaders. In the early 1990s she became fascinated with the shift from Newtonian physics to quantum physics. In the earlier physics the emphasis was on physical objects as the building blocks of all that is real. In quantum physics the focus is on energy as the basic building block of all that is real. In her book Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future, she writes of her belief that we can change the world if we just begin listening to one another again. “Great social change movements always begin from the simple act of friends talking to each other about their fears and dreams.”

The relationships developed in communities of practice create the context in which new patterns and forms emerge and become real. People engaged in similar work create self-organized, non-mandated relationships. We form these relationships to develop the knowledge to become the best that we can be at our own practice of ministry. From these self-created networks, new

practices and knowledge emerge and often develop into the core competencies of changing organizations. Potentials become manifest and new capabilities are born.

Margaret Wheatley quotes Burt Mannis author of The Leaders Edge, as saying, “In this day and age, if you’re not confused, you’re not thinking clearly.” Margaret Wheatley encourages leaders to get into the messiness of data before trying to see what it means. She says, “ If you want to be open to a total reorganizing of your mental constructs or your mind maps, you must go through a period of letting go and confusion.” From the confusion of this time new order will emerge, not by moving boxes around an organizational chart, but through networks of relationships that care passionately about what difference it will make in the next three years that we are Presbyterians. Our task is not to impose order, but to observe patterns emerging from the chaos.

Each of these events points to the value of getting away from the daily routines of problem solving managers and to “get on the balcony” to gain a larger perspective on what God has called us to be and do as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and in our individual governing bodies and agencies. This leads to a series of questions:

1. Who are the people you trust with your hopes, dreams, questions and learning?
2. How is knowledge developed and shared within your communities of practice?
3. What have you learned from others this year regarding the future toward which God is leading us?
4. What difference can the Presbyterian Church (USA), your synod or your agency make in the church or the world in the next three years?

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