



## A New Way for a New Day Beyond the Maze and into the Labyrinth

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### Beyond the Maze and into the Labyrinth GAC and MGB Moving Forward in Mission and Ministry

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#### **Preface**

The 217<sup>th</sup> General Assembly gave GAC and MGB leaders the mandate to meet annually and intentionally for prayer and planning, listening to and sharing with one another. The hope is that through this annual meeting there will be more effective communication and coordination among Presbyteries, Synods, and the entities of General Assembly to the end that we are strengthened in our common mission and diverse ministries. This paper is written as a reflection piece for that gathering to the end that we may prayerfully and faithfully move forward in “*A New Way for a New Day*”.

#### **Introduction - Beyond the Maze and into the Labyrinth**

The first time I walked a labyrinth, I wondered what the big deal was. I was hot, sweaty, and had no new insights or revelations. The labyrinth had more of a maze-like quality, rather than that of a spiritual experience.

My second encounter with a labyrinth was during a time when I was pondering some significant personal and professional issues. As I walked, this time I prayed and I listened. The labyrinth's movement to the center, and then back to the edge, and on again to the center, approximated my journey. By the time I got to the center, I was in a different place and ready to receive the wisdom that an inscribed plaque, nailed to an oak sapling at the center of the labyrinth, said: *The tree says, trust is my strength.* I had my answer.

As we move ahead and try to find answers and directions, are we in a maze or a labyrinth? Some of the conversations occurring within the PCUSA in all governing bodies have a maze-like quality. Leaders in the church are operating at crisis speed. The issues are many and complex: restructuring, funding, loss of members, congregations in crisis, sexual misconduct, staff cuts, etc. The result is that leadership at all levels of the church find themselves hot and tired. The dominant question is, how we can find our way out of this maze?

A more helpful image for church leaders for finding a “new way for a new day” may be that of the labyrinth. How can we create learning communities, virtual teams, ongoing conversations, and a spiritual practice that allows church leaders to walk, listen, talk and pray together? At a typical meeting of the church, whether GA, Synod, or Presbytery, we do not often get to ask the important questions. Why? We don't have the time. Decisions must be made, the urgent presses us on. Doing the same thing and expecting different results means we will keep losing members year after year. We are in a maze and are desperately trying to get out.



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Developing a labyrinth approach means that in some way, form, and forum, every inter- and intra-governing body conversation begins addressing not just the crises, but also the big picture. At every GA, we react to 140-200 overtures that are urgent to someone, but we may miss addressing the most important issues before us. When, how, and where can we begin having meaningful, efficacious, and ongoing conversations that address how we can faithfully respond to what is truly **important and essential** for us to be faithful to Jesus Christ. The question is, how can we not only survive, but also thrive in a new cultural context.

Is this a new day? In 2006, we have an opportunity to move in new directions. According to the leadership theory of John Kotter, change requires: establishing a sense of urgency, creating a guiding coalition, developing a vision and strategy, communication of the transformational/change vision, empowering staff/leadership for broad-based action, generating short-term wins, consolidating gains, and anchoring new approaches in the culture.

Few would disagree that continued loss of membership and funding, property issues, New Wineskins and the Presbyterian Global Fellowship, the continuing downsizing of national staff, and the inability of many Presbyteries to fund and maintain staff at past levels have created that sense of urgency. There is the possibility of a new guiding coalition being formed, at least within that group instructed to meet annually as a combined GAC-MGB.

When we understand our task as church leaders as walking a labyrinth (symbolically) with other leaders, the answer we find may not be as direct as a plaque on a tree. But instead of feeling we are going in circles, or wondering if we have been here before, we may find our way. The point of the labyrinth is not to find a way out, but to find the way through.

### **Getting to the Big Picture: Issues, Challenges, Questions and Opportunities**

As we find walking companions for this “labyrinthine” journey, foundational in moving forward as a denomination is: asking the right questions about the right issues. Archimedes said with the right leverage he could move the world. There are the necessary, pressing challenges that will always demand the attention of the church’s leadership. However, beyond the urgent needs are the important big picture issues, vital concerns, and questions that need to be asked. If we address those concerns, finding solutions or maybe even just having the conversation about these challenges and issues will give us some leverage to move the PCUSA forward in our mission and ministry. The following is not an exhaustive list, but these are some of the issues and questions to get us out of the urgent [maze] and into the future.

#### **1. The Search for a Common vision?**

If we drill down to the essential core vision of any church, our mission is to fulfill the Great Commission and our mandate is the Great Commandment. But beyond that the picture gets fuzzy and unclear.

Our reformed vision of the church has three component parts: theology, polity, and mission or praxis. The Book of Order, in Chapters 1 and 2, gives us our **theology** in



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broad strokes. Chapters 1 and 3 define our unique **polity/governance**, which is based on the radical principle of governance by elected representative bodies (councils), and a connectional relationship between those governing bodies with inherent mutual accountability and responsibility. The third component is our **mission or praxis** (Chapter 3). Unless we are in mission, we are not the Church. Mission is not only what happens somewhere else; it is the inherent charter for the church universal and every particular congregation. *Go into the world and proclaim the gospel... teach... baptize... make disciples. And love God, other, self.*

The conversation in the PCUSA these past several years has in part been concerned with this conundrum: in our theology, polity, and praxis how broad can the strokes be before they are meaningless, and how narrow can the strokes of our brush be before we miss the reality of Jesus' life, work, word and Living Redeeming Presence.

*Possible questions to ask in a Labyrinthine way and collegial context:*

- *Can the PCUSA in this particular time find a common vision?*
- *Do we already have a vision that needs to be lifted up and celebrated? Where? If not, how do we find one?*
- *How can chapter one of the Peace, Unity, Purity report [Discerning our Christian Identity in and for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century] be instructive?*
- *How can that vision be communicated and celebrated?*
- *When comparing our current situation and debate to other times in church history, do our current differences rise to the level that division is the only answer? (Note: di-vision is about vision and dividing is about resources and power.*

### 2. **Making our Case - A Question of Purpose**

An essential task of a lawyer in a jury trial is to make a compelling case. If a poor case is made, either the facts cannot substantiate the legal argument, or the lawyer did not do the proper homework or planning.

If the leadership in the church (GAC –MBG types) were asked to argue and call witnesses before a jury made up of the typical persons in the pews, could we make a compelling and convincing case regarding the value of the PCUSA? If there is no real or perceived added value for denominational structures, whether at a Presbytery, Synod, or General Assembly level, then, no matter how many times we restructure, we are focused on the wrong issue.

Additionally, if a particular session perceives the connectional church (GA) as something to work around, or if pastors feel GA, Presbytery, or Synods are more like constraining weights rather than energizing partners in ministry, then we will continue to have funding problems and staff cuts at the national as well as middle governing body level.



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*Possible questions to ask in a Labyrinthine way and collegial context:*

- *In a purpose-driven world, what is our purpose as the PCUSA?*
- *As we continue to learn the implications of living in a 21st century post-modern post-Christendom culture, why should we as the PCUSA continue to exist?*
- *Can we make a compelling case for GAC or Synods or Presbyteries?*
- *Do we have an ecclesiology for Middle Governing Body work?*
- *In an age when churches are an eclectic mix of religious traditions and experience, whose job is it to gather the resources and testimony to make a clear witness and persuasive case for the PCUSA to every new members class, session, and Presbytery.*

### 3. **The Care of Relationship and Connections**

Our church polity, as recognized by civil courts, states that every congregation in the PCUSA is covenantally and structurally connected with all other congregations through Presbyteries, Synods and General Assembly. However, we are a connectional church that in recent years has not connected very well. Without the cultivation, building, and maintaining of a healthy web of relationships at all levels we have been handicapped and unable to move forward. Trust or lack of it is about relationships. We have maintained a structure, but essential to the healthy functioning of any structure in a connectional church is nurturing relationships.

Our church polity and structure says we are family, but we do not easily trust folks we do not know, especially those remote and removed from us, which is how many people in the pew view those in Presbytery, Synod, or General Assembly service and leadership. More than a structural problem, we have a relational problem. One way to begin to bridge the dis-connect is to intentionally address the relationship-trust issue at a governing body level.

*Possible questions to ask in a Labyrinthine way and collegial context:*

- *How do the GAC and OGA and other GA entities look at and connect with Presbyteries and Synods and vice versa?*
- *How can Presbyteries cultivate a relationship with the person in the pew and with each local pastor and session?*
- *If the heart and soul of the Presbyterian Church USA is our congregations, without which there is no Presbytery, or Synod or GA, and if there is a gap between local, regional, and national bodies, then what is the role and responsibility of GAC-MGB in closing the gap?*
- *Who nurtures the relationships and honors the connections that are at the heart of this network of congregations, pastors, educators and Presbyteries?*
- *How can those relationships realistically be nurtured and those connections actually happen?*



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### 4. **The Question of Leadership: Who leads... why and how?** (Polity – governance – power)

We face unique challenges in our roles as GAC-MGB leaders because of our form of government. Within our unique representative bottom-up top-down connectional polity, leadership in the PCUSA is both an art and science, a gift of the Spirit as well as a skill set and a set of competencies leaders in the church can develop.

In our connectional structure and polity, GAC, OGA and MGB staffs are called to manage structures, processes, and people to fulfill the mission and direction as mandated by the Book of Order, or as required by an action of a particular Presbytery, Synod, or General Assembly. However, if we, as MGB-OGA-GAC leaders, are only managers and custodians of processes and systems, where are the leadership, coordination, communication and big-picture thinking necessary to set a common vision and course?

“The search for excellence” is one of the mantras of current leadership theory, but serving faithfully and well (“Well done thou good and faithful servant.”) has always been the hallmark of servant-leadership in the church. The challenge we face as GAC-MGB leaders is to serve faithfully and well, without burning out amidst the competing demands, diminishing resources, and increasing leadership requirements of serving at this time and place in the life of the PCUSA.

*Possible questions to ask in a Labyrinthine way and collegial context:*

- *What does leadership at the GAC, Synod and Presbytery level look like and act like in our 21<sup>st</sup> century context?*
- *Who has the power and how can it be better shared?*
- *Who has the time and the responsibility to insure that structures are working and our mission accomplished?*
- *Who is working overtly or covertly to change those structures?*
- *How can the Peace, Unity, Purity report, chapter 4 be instructive for us?*
- *How is the church supporting and training this current generation of leaders?*
- *How are we training the next generation of leaders?*

### 5. **The Congregational Dilemma: From Membership Focus to Missional Focus**

The move from membership focus to missional focus (i.e. missio Dei) is radical for any denomination and congregation, but, in a post-Christian and post-modern world, it is essential. In the 1950's and 1960's Presbyterians and all main line churches were the unofficial established church. Presbyterian churches grew because the culture encouraged folks to come. New church buildings in the new suburbs didn't hurt, and for a generation or two, if we built it, they did come. One reason our denomination and each congregation continue to lose members is that congregations, sessions, and



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members have not changed their thinking from a fellowship/membership model to a worship/discipleship/ missional model. The 21st century reality and culture no longer reinforces and supports our values.

There is a reason Jesus invited us to be fishers of men and women. The opportunity is here and now. The Great Commission is at the center of who we are as Jesus' disciples. Adult baptisms are one indication of how we are reaching out to the large and growing number of unchurched people in our areas.

Unless members of a local congregation are making a case for Jesus Christ in their community and world, giving witness to the life transforming power of the gospel, that congregation is not likely to grow. Unless the Great Commandment is lived out in the life of a congregation, the temptation will be for that congregation to become a members-only club that wants only enough new members, just like us, to maintain what we have.

*Possible questions to ask in a Labyrinthine way and collegial context:*

- *Is mission a primary work of the church universal and particular congregations? If not how do we strengthen that understanding?*
- *What role and responsibility do GAC, Synods and Presbyteries have in the support of mission and in the support of congregations as the denomination's mission centers?*
- *How can we better support our global mission in 72 countries with 500 mission co-workers? What could a new mission funding system look like?*
- *Is GAC, Synod, or the Presbyteries role best understood as the primary agent for mission or as a broker of mission opportunities connecting resources with needs with personnel?*
- *How can Presbyteries partner more effectively with local congregations in planting new congregations?*

### 6. **The Congregational Dilemma: What is job one?**

The denomination has not lost members; local congregations have lost members. However, if we as church leaders were running a business and each franchise had lost money for 40 years running, where would that business focus its corporate strategy and resources? What have we done? We continue to try to save the world with resolutions, which may or may not be heard, while we are going out of business.

Additionally, can the 1950's fellowship/membership model for doing church sustain us in the future? Discipleship is not something that happens easily through one hour of worship and 15 minutes of coffee fellowship on Sunday morning. Helping congregations intentionally develop a discipleship strategy, cultivating small group ministries, and empowering members for service that goes beyond institutional maintenance are part of the critical path that needs exploration and support so PCUSA be a vital, vibrant next generation church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



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*Possible questions to ask in a Labyrinthine way and collegial context:*

- *Is job one for congregations membership recruitment or making disciples?*
- *Is job one for GAC and MBG partnering with congregations and Presbyteries birthing new churches, helping churches in decline find new momentum to grow, or encouraging the transformation of congregations from a membership/fellowship model to one that is contagiously missional?*
- *If we were to do an analysis of the overtures that have come to the last 10 General Assemblies, what would they tell us about the concerns Presbyteries have? Do those concerns get at what it will mean for us to be a church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?*

### 7. **Do we have a fundraising problem, stewardship problem, or Spiritual Problem?**

Our Book of Order says in G-1.0100b. "Christ calls the Church into being, giving it all that is necessary for its mission to the world." If that is true, what are the current funding issues saying to us? Funding may not be the problem; but it may be a symptom both of declining membership and of the erosion of the connection between the mission of the GAC and MGB and the person in the pew. A new funding design needs to address issues of trust and apathy as well find ways to more readily interpret the churches' mission stories to the person in the pew. Presbyteries are a key link in building trust.

However, foundationally the church financial future cannot be based on fund-raising techniques and principles. At the heart of our budget short-falls are theological issues that only a renewed understanding of stewardship at a personal level can address. It is not the need of the institution that motivates people to give; it is the need of the giver to give, and getting to that point is a spiritual/theological issue.

*Possible questions to ask in a Labyrinthine way and collegial context:*

- *If we believe that "Christ calls and gives... the church... all that is necessary for its mission to the world", what are the current funding issues saying to us?*
- *How do we become solution focused, rather than just being focused on solving the funding shortfalls?*
- *Whose problem is it? Whose job is it to get the discussion going and find solutions: GAC? Presbyteries? Sessions? Pastors? Or the person in the pew?*
- *How are we touching people in their hearts related to the mission and its support?*
- *How can technology help close the gap between a local congregation and a mission opportunity?*



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### 8. **Who's talking... who's listening...?** (Communication and interpretation and new technologies)

During the 217<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, an active elder, who happens to be a lawyer, was on a business trip. He told me that in the three cities he visited that week, he read three different versions of what GA did. He called me concerned and confused.

The day after the 216<sup>th</sup> General Assembly adjourned, on both the Internet and the editorial pages, others outside the church defined and shaped the conversation related to Israeli divestment. As a church, we were immediately put in a defensive posture. For the next 2 years, GAC, MGB, and pastors of local congregations were picking up the pieces because in an internet age we don't yet know how to communicate effectively and well; so we spent most of our time dealing with someone else's definition, interpretation, and spin of our work. One GA news conference or the annual end-of-Assembly tabloid does not have a chance in the face of blog pages, the avalanche of forwarded e-mail correspondence, and disinformation in advocacy journals, and Fox news.

*Possible questions to ask in a Labyrinthine way and collegial context:*

- *Is our communication network effective in an Internet age? Who is telling our story? Who is listening?*
- *Who speaks for the church, nationally? Is it the Stated Clerk, Executive Director of the GAC, or Moderator of GA? Is that model still effective? Who speaks regionally?*
- *What if a GA press release, GA decision, or GA entity's action does not play well on the home front? What can we do? Who does the damage control? How do we get a heads-up that we might have to do damage control?*
- *How is the mission story and work of the church interpreted to the person in the pew?*
- *Whose story and agenda are they hearing? What stories are GAC and each Presbytery telling? How? Who's listening? Who's doing the talking?*
- *Have we made it easy for pastors to have concise and powerful stories of how God is at work in and through our church that could be used as sermon illustrations?*
- *The Mission Yearbook is helpful, but how can the mission story of the larger church be heard in 11,000 congregations every Sunday morning?*

### 9. **Beyond Compartmentalization into Cooperation and Coordination**

If the world is becoming flat, so is the church. Many no longer see or value the General Assembly Council, General Assembly, Office of the General Assembly, Board of Pensions, Presbyterian Investment and Loan Program, Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, Presbyterian Foundation) as corporate headquarters with the



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answers, money, and solutions for all parts of the Church. Some value Presbyteries only as the necessary connection between the Book of Order requirement and a congregation's ability to get a pastor.

In the 1970's era of management by objective and top-down management directives, we leaned heavy in the direction of a centralized structure to do the work of the church. Yet in time that created a massive distance between the person in the pew and the larger mission of the church. Since we exist only because of and to serve congregations, the current trend toward a flattening of all structures can also be claimed as going back to the original vision in Philadelphia in 1706.

We also have turf issues that are hard to address. We have 6 separate corporations and 173 Presbyteries and 11,000 plus congregations and 500 mission co-workers all working for the global entity called the PCUSA. GA entities operate in separate silos, and they report and are accountable to biennial General Assemblies. However, with Assemblies that only meet for one week every other year, and by design go out of business after each meeting and bring a whole new set of folks to the table [assembly] in two years, is there adequate communication, coordination, understanding and a shared vision between and among OGA-GAC-MGB-BOP-PILP-PF-PPH?

As leaders we understand the various complexities of GA structures, but for the person in the pew there is little understanding of and no distinction between the Stated Clerk, PPC, and the moderator, GAC, GAC Executive Director, and the 216<sup>th</sup> or 217<sup>th</sup> GA. It all one big blob...one cloth. When the Stated Clerk writes a letter, he writes for the whole church. When a denominational official goes to an area, the whole church goes as well. When a book gets published by PPH, it affects the whole church. In 2004, when the assembly voted at 11:00 p.m. on the Iraq war, calling it immoral and illegal, or when the 217<sup>th</sup> G.A. said what a particular meat packing company in one town should or shouldn't do, these actions brought the whole church into the discussion for much longer than the 5 minutes it took for the assembly to take the actions.

*Possible questions to ask in a Labyrinthine way and collegial context:*

- *How do we begin talking about these issues of structure and accountability and cooperation and not shoot ourselves in the foot?*
- *Among OGA-GAC-MGB-BOP-PILP-PF-PPH, is there adequate communication, coordination, understanding and a shared vision?*
- *Are there better ways to make decisions in all levels of the church?*  
*[See the PUP report chapter 4].*

### 10. **Developing an immune system for the PCUSA and in each Presbytery**

In the best sense, the many advocacy groups and their publications raise questions that need to be addressed, but in the worst case they spread a dis-ease, disinformation, distrust, and a negativity that is hard to overcome. Organizations that are growing



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have a five to one positive to negative conversation ratio. When a person in the pew talks about the PCUSA, do they know and share five positive mission stories that they have knowledge of and are conversant with, or is it more likely they will relate several negative stories? Key to moving forward is developing new means for GAC-MGB to get the positive and life-changing stories told.

Also, disease in the body happens when the immune system is not working properly, when pathogens are not stopped. Vision, core values, clear boundaries, effective, respected and strong leadership are all part of an organizations immune system. Do we have an immune system and is it working?

*Possible questions to ask in a Labyrinthine way and collegial context:*

- *What is the talk around the water cooler and congregational parking lots about the PCUSA? How can that change?*
  - *How can we develop a healthier immune system and still honor our democratic, Spirit-led, open process?*
  - *What does a healthy denomination look like?*
11. **Can we discipline ourselves to focus on what is most important?** Each General Assembly by current design is responsive to overtures sent to it by the Presbyteries. Of the 140 overtures in 2006, which ones were expressions of our essential values and core business, which ones were merely urgent, and which ones contributed to the perspective that we were just arranging deck chairs on the Titanic?

**What are the brutal facts** about OGA, GAC, MGB – 16 Synods and 173 Presbyteries, partner churches around the world? If you were buying stock, would PCUSA be buy-sell-hold? What about each of the 173 Presbyteries? Congregations? How can we look at the brutal facts without become paralyzed and defensive? What are some real life scenarios about those facts? How do we think ahead in a proactive rather than reactive way?

*Possible questions to ask in a Labyrinthine way and collegial context:*

- *Without constraining the movement of the Holy Spirit, how can a better process be put in place to help each particular General Assembly focus on what is vital and important to our long-term health as well as our core business?*
- *What role do Presbyteries have in insuring that each Assembly pays attention to what would be called our core business and also to the brutal facts?*

### Final Thoughts

In 1706, seven clergy (and soon to follow elders) gathered to practice what they believed was at the core of both New Testament Christianity and Calvin's theology. The original seven came on horseback to Philadelphia 300 years ago to encourage each other in faith, preach, and take responsibility for finding additional suitable shepherds (pastors) for the gathering flocks of Presbyterians in the colonies. Soon they became a deliberative body, or council as in Acts 15,



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making decisions affecting each other and the whole church. While there were other Calvinists in the colonies who were inclined toward congregationalism, the early Presbyterians believed that clergy could be more faithful, churches stronger, and mission more effective (strategic) when they participated in this web of relationships, and partnerships, that became the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

Over the 300 years, there have been bumps in the road. However, when we look back, we see that this church of ours has planted well over 11,000 churches, set out a form of government that was copied by the founders of our country, and launched mission in the name of Jesus Christ across the world. We have much to celebrate.

At the core of reformed theology is our bedrock belief that God is Sovereign, Jesus is Lord, and the Holy Spirit is at work. We, as members of the PCUSA, are one expression of the Church universal. As such, the PCUSA expresses a dimension of belief and practice that God has seen to be faithful and useful in the **past** through:

- The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;
- The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;
- The maintenance of divine worship,
- The preservation of the truth;
- The promotion of social righteousness;
- And the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

The question is where do we go now? What does God want to do in the **future** with this part of the church universal called Presbyterian, USA? What is God already doing (in the **present**) to which we need to realign and reorient ourselves?

This is an anxious and uncertain time. But at the center of our reformed theology and practice is that word TRUST. Our confessions in various times and places have consistently affirmed that in life and in death we belong to God, as does the church. When all is said and done, we trust this church at this time to God.

Thanks be to God!

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