

Beyond the Maze and into a Labyrinth: A New GAC-MGB Partnership

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In recent years, many have felt that the conversations occurring within the PC(USA) have had a maze-like quality. Leaders in the church are operating at crisis speed. The issues are complex: restructuring, loss of members, congregations in crisis, sexual misconduct, New Wineskins, mission funding and the list goes on. Mission co-workers, pastors, elders, the elected and called leadership in Middle Governing Body work and at the General Assembly Council are all searching for answers.

However, at a typical meeting of the church, whether at General Assembly or at a presbytery, we do not have the time to discern the questions we need to ask. Decisions must be made, and the urgent presses us on. Doing the same thing and expecting different results means we will keep losing members and nothing will change. In a time like this, how can we create spiritual practices, ongoing conversations and learning communities that allow church leaders to walk, listen, talk and pray together?

Believing that the PC(USA) is facing a new day, the 217th GA mandated that an annual meeting occur between Middle Governing Body (MGB) executive staff members and the General Assembly Council for prayer, conversation and planning. Using a labyrinth as a metaphor for the meeting, GAC and MGB leaders took two days in the fall of 2006 to begin a “labyrinthine” conversation. What is the difference between a walk in a maze and a journey in a labyrinth?

The first time I walked a labyrinth I was in a hurry. I had no revelations nor was it a spiritual experience. I was just hot, tired, and sweaty.

My second encounter with a labyrinth was when I was pondering some significant issues. As I walked, slower this time, I prayed and listened. The labyrinth's movement to the center and than back approximated my journey. When I got to the end I was ready to receive the wisdom that an inscribed plaque, nailed to an oak sapling at the center, offered: “The tree says, trust is my strength.” I had my answer.

Developing a “labyrinthine” approach for the PC(USA) means that in some way, every inter- and intra-governing body meeting begin with a reminder that we are missional communities of faith who need to learn how to walk and pray together before we divide the house and vote. A labyrinthine approach centers us in the presence of the Triune God, who has sent the church on a mission for the sake of the world. Scripture, guiding our Labyrinthine journey may lead us to the realization that God is not as interested in our denominational debates as we are. Our conversations and journey will ultimately be judged, as will all of life, by our by “our denominational fruits” by which we are known.

Even when church leaders, from sessions to the GAC, understand our task as walking a labyrinth (symbolically) with other leaders, not just solving the problem of the hour or winning

a vote, the answer we find still may not be as direct as a plaque on a tree. However, instead of feeling that we are going in circles, we may discover the questions we need to ask, and then we can begin to find our way. The point of the labyrinth is not to find a way out, but to find the way through.


Using the metaphor of a labyrinth, and a process based on Appreciative Inquiry rather than Roberts Rules, the 225 GAC-MGB church leaders who gathered in the fall of 2006 shared conversation and reflections related to the following questions vital to the future of the PC(USA).

- Can the PC(USA), in this particular time, find a common vision?
- In a purpose-driven world, what is the purpose of the PC(USA)?
- Who nurtures the relationships and honors the connections that are at the heart of this network of congregations, pastors, educators and Presbyteries?
- Facing the realities of our 21st century context and respecting our historic polity, what can and should leaders do?
- In a post-Christendom world where each congregation is a mission post and every member a missionary, can we make disciples through one hour of worship and 15 minutes of coffee fellowship on Sunday morning? How do we address the congregational dilemma of moving from a 1950s fellowship/membership model for doing church to a missional/outward model for being the church?
- Does the PC(USA) have a fundraising problem, a stewardship problem, or a spiritual Problem? If, as the Book of Order states, "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?
- Is the PC(USA)'s communication network effective in an Internet age? Who's talking ... who's listening ... and who is telling our story?
- If the world is becoming flat, what does that mean organizationally for the PC(USA)? How and where can we begin having a conversation about structure, leadership, accountability, decision making and partnership for a 21st century PC(USA)?
- What does a healthy denomination look like? How do we get there?
- Without constraining the movement of the Holy Spirit, how can a better process be put in place to help each General Assembly focus on what is vital and important to our long-term health and faithfulness? (Note: Of the 140 overtures sent to GA from presbyteries, which were expressions of the PC(USA)'s essential values and core purpose, and which ones contributed to the perspective that each GA is merely rearranging chairs on the Titanic?)

Organizational theorists have suggested that in a time of adaptive change, times when we do not even know what questions to ask, let alone have the answers, creating learning communities is critically important. (see Ron Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*). One way to understand the early church is to notice that when they could not find their way, they created a council (see Acts 15) that functioned as a learning community. They took the time to have a labyrinthine conversation that enabled them to listen to each other and hear the Holy Spirit's guidance.

The GAC- MGB conversation is not meant to solve all our current issues, but the wisdom of the 217th GA was to create a learning community, or labyrinthine journey, where such conversations can happen. The second of these conversations will be taking place September 18-19, 2007. The theme for this year's meeting is *A New Way for a New Day: Moving from Conversation, through Challenge, towards Change*.

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Before his call to Middle Governing Body work in 2001, Graham served as Senior Pastor of three churches during his 25 years of congregational ministry. He is a member of the 2006 and 2007 MGB-GAC planning team. The paper on which this article is based is: [Beyond the Maze and into the Labyrinth](#)  GAC and MGB Moving Forward in Mission and Ministry.