

Vision and Vitality Task Force

The General Assembly Council received letters from the Synod of the Southwest and the Presbyteries of Santa Fe and Sierra Blanca, requesting that the GAC hold a church wide meeting to consider the viability of our presbyteries and synods. The GAC appointed a Task Force (Vision and Vitality Task Force) to look into this request. This report comes from the Task Force to the GAC. The Rev. Dr. Allison Seed is chair of the Task Force.

The Task Force held a meeting on Feb. 14-16 in Albuquerque, attended by about 150 persons from our presbyteries and synods. The Rev. Gil Rendle, Senior Consultant from the Alban Institute, was the leader/facilitator. The purpose of this meeting was to begin dialogue on the future of middle governing bodies. In Albuquerque, with Gil Rendle's help, we took several "first steps" in this dialogue:

1. We looked at the larger picture of the American religious landscape, including cultural shifts and demographic drivers. We considered how generational values have changed, and the emergence and dominance of mega-churches.
2. We were challenged with the need for church leadership to move away from technical problem solving and learn new ways to do adaptive work..
3. We came to a better understanding that systemic change must come from the bottom up and not from the top down and only by leaders being willing to find ways to be more adaptive and agile than ever before.
4. We came to understand that risk, experimentation, and learning must become the daily practice of middle governing body leaders.

All of Rendle's materials and two summary articles are posted on the Presbyterian Church's web site (www.pcusa.org/mgbconnect).

The Task Force continues to encourage church wide (bottom up) discussions about the future vision and vitality of our middle governing bodies. To encourage this, the Task Force held workshops in connection with the Regional Consultations of the Board of Pensions. Two of the Task Force members led a workshop at each of the three Regional meetings. Here is a summary of some of those workshops:

ADAPTIVE WORK

Gil Rendle challenged us to give up our old "technical thinking" way of working in our presbyteries and our synods and to take up "adaptive thinking." In this enterprise, Rendle

challenged that everyone will need to be **learning**.....learning about the new realities confronting us in our rapidly changing situation, and learning new ways to be the church in the face of these realities.

The participants in the Regional Pension Workshops were challenged to think about what this adaptive thinking might mean in their governing bodies. One group proposed that this adaptive work must look two directions: Inward, focusing on relationships, and Outward, focusing on mission. Our context is shifting rapidly, so we need to be clear about a) our Identity (Who are we as...the Presbytery of X, Y, or Z?), and b) our Calling (What is God calling us to do and to be?). One of the difficulties we will encounter as we attempt this adaptive thinking is the necessity to change our "culture" as a Church. Since changing any culture is accomplished only over the "long haul", we need to take a longer time frame for this work. We cannot expect deep system change to occur in a short time. However, the world around us and our church realities are changing so rapidly that we must begin this work at once. In effect, we need to re-invent ourselves as a denomination. Those present believe that this re-invention cannot begin at the national level, nor will most congregations be able to do it on their own. It means that our middle governing bodies have a critical role of moving our beloved Church forward into this adaptive work. Also, because resistance will be so strong, working across governing body lines, and even in some new configurations, will be necessary. Experimentation and innovation are to be encouraged. This kind of learning will take some time, so patience and perseverance will be needed. In fact, there will be no one "end point" for leaders willing to engage in adaptive leadership. For deep change to occur, leaders must have a sense of urgency about the present state of things. One could say that the Church in the days ahead will be in a constant process of "re-inventing" itself.

OUR PRESBYTERIES AND SYNODS

So where are we to begin? What are the first steps that we could take to in our presbyteries and synods? A good first step would be to prepare people for change, to generate a climate in our presbyteries and synods where people expect change to happen and to become more comfortable with the uncertainty and chaos that will come with it. A necessary element of this preparation will be to increase the level of communication and trust in the presbytery or synod. We need to begin at the congregational level. Rendle has helped us see that deep system change must be from the bottom up. So we would do well in our presbyteries to help our congregations vision themselves for the future. We need to build collegiality among our congregations. As presbyteries begin this work, we need to build collegiality among our presbyteries. Adaptive thinking cannot happen with a single, isolated governing body. We need to engage one another across governing body lines for it to happen.

However, each governing body must start with where it is at the present time. Begin the conversation about vision with folks in your governing body, and then find another governing body with whom you can talk. Stories, models, patterns, discoveries, new ways

of thinking.....shared with another governing body can move the conversation forward. Experimentation is to be encouraged and rewarded. Most of us will discover we are in chaos, and to learn that another governing body is also there can be very encouraging. In all these conversations, strive for spiritual authenticity and look for what God would have your governing body become and do. One participant suggested that we re-define the "presbytery" by its 1)relationships, 2) spiritual life, and 3) facilitation of mission. The kind of adaptive work required to reach this point will require risk taking. So risk taking leaders are to be sought and rewarded for taking risks. It also will involve dealing with losses, so leaders will need to pay attention to facilitating grieving processed in the governing body so folks will work through their grief and move forward into a new future.

NEXT STEPS

The conversations at the Regional Pensions Conferences were energized. Participants from every region of the church realize the urgency of new kinds of thinking about the vision and vitality of our presbyteries and synods. We heard affirmed again the importance of building networks across the Church for these conversations. We plan to provide opportunities for conversations at other conferences later this year: the Communicators Network Meeting (Aug. 2-5), the Elders Conference (Aug.29-31), and the Fall Polity Conference (Oct. 10-12). We know that conversations are occurring in several regions of the Church. Some that have been reported to us include: the Synod of Mid-America (the Synod and all its presbyteries), the Synod of Lakes and Prairies (three Nebraska presbyteries with one in Iowa; conversations with Dakota Presbytery), the Synod of the Northeast (in several of its presbytery clusters), the Synod of the Southwest (the Synod and its four presbyteries), and even across synod boundaries, where Santa Fe Presbytery (Southwest) and Western Colorado (Rocky Mountains) are having conversations. From the interest heard in the Regional Pension meetings, we can only assume that conversations are being held in other places.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) web site continues to be a place where folks can connect to share learnings about their adaptive work (go to: www.pcusa.org/mgbconnect), or to go back to the foundational documents that came from our February, 2007, meeting in Albuquerque.