

IS THERE A PRESBYTERY CRUNCH?

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past several months in my conversations with leaders from Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) presbyteries and synods, I have heard that our middle governing bodies are experiencing a “crunch.” I knew some of the realities of our synods—ten of them have been in transition in mission design and executive leadership over the past six years. I decided that a more intentional look at presbyteries was needed. Since January 2005, I have visited with the executive forums (gatherings of presbytery executive/ general presbyters and synod executives) of ten of our fifteen synod regions. The following paper attempts to lift up the important learnings from these visits.

My methodology was to have an open-ended conversation with each forum on the perceived crunch in presbyteries. I define the crunch as:

- pressure on one side from presbytery life being much more complicated than it was a decade or two ago, and
- pressure on the other side from having scarce resources (people and money) to accomplish the mission of the presbytery.

I asked two questions:

- How is your presbytery experiencing the crunch, if it is?
- How is your presbytery adapting to the crunch (using the biological paradigm of adaptation)?

BACKGROUND DATA

The Research Services department supplied me with data early in my exploration. From this data, it is important to note that nearly 42 percent of our presbyteries currently have fewer than 10,000 members.¹

¹ There is nothing magical about 10,000; I use it only to compare with the reorganization of the former United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA) in 1969 and following. When regional synods were formed in the UPCUSA and presbytery boundaries were realigned, the general rule of thumb was that a presbytery would have approximately 20,000 members. Some presbyteries had fewer than 20,000 because of geography and other considerations. But, generally, a structure for planning and administration of mission at the presbytery level was developed that “needed” 20,000 members (and the mission dollars these 20,000 could produce) to carry it off effectively. The current statistic of 10,000 means that nearly half of our presbyteries have only half the strength (in number of members) as in the early 1970s.

At the time of reunion in 1983 and following, the size of newly formed presbyteries varied. Many had more than 20,000 members; a few had less. Today, four of the seven largest presbyteries (Charlotte, Grace, Greater Atlanta, and New Covenant) have more than or just under 40,000 members.

GENERAL FINDINGS

The simple generalization important to note is that, as our denominational membership has declined, presbyteries have had to adapt their mission programs and ecclesiastical structure for doing mission to live within the limits of fewer people and money resources.

While acknowledging some regional differences, I think it is fair to conclude from my conversations this year that all of our presbyteries own up to experiencing the crunch of having fewer resources to do a more complex ministry than in previous times. The most obvious common thread is that every presbytery is struggling with its focus, mission, or vision.

What follows is a summarization of the recurring issues I heard this year.

Fewer Mission Dollars

The most pressing issue is a shortage of money. A couple of decades ago, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly consulted regularly about how to divide up mission dollars. The shape and format of these consultations varied, but all three governing body levels shared a common assumption that sessions would send the bulk of their mission dollars as *unified* dollars to be divided by the three governing body levels, as they negotiated. Of course, sessions or donors designated some funds to specific missions, but these designations were not seen as a significant threat to unified mission support.

All of that has changed radically. The cultural context in which our Presbyterian members live thrives on designated giving. Donors want to be able to follow their dollars, so more and more are giving to worthwhile causes outside the PC(USA), both local and worldwide. Moreover, the younger generations of Presbyterians have not grown up with a “blind” loyalty to Presbyterian mission. Therefore, our congregations are receiving smaller amounts (in percentages) of the benevolence dollars of Presbyterian members than was true twenty years ago. Couple this trend with the membership dynamics mentioned above, and it is not surprising that many of our sessions are strapped for dollars to fund the budgets of their congregations. Less is left to send to the higher governing bodies.

Less money being sent to the higher governing bodies is creating a domino effect. For presbyteries, the effect is that mission dollars are increasingly scarce for mission programs. Presbyteries, therefore, increase per capita rates to the point that, in many places, they feel they cannot increase them further.

Presbytery mission has changed radically. Presbyteries are no longer funding local and regional mission projects. Even programs and projects within the “Presbyterian family” (homes, colleges, campus ministries) have had their funds reduced or, in some cases, cut completely. Presbytery camps are in trouble nearly everywhere. Some have been sold or closed. Major subsidies from presbytery budgets for camps and conference centers (which used to be the norm) are no longer available.

There is a bit of good news. The financial crunch is described to be less pressing within two regions of the church—certain areas of the Synod of South Atlantic and parts of the West Coast. The executives in pockets of these two regions report that, while dollars are a bit short, the financial crunch has not hit them like it has elsewhere in the denomination. “Yes,” they said, “we could use more mission money, but we are still able to do most of what we want to do.” I want to emphasize that this holds true for only a few of the presbyteries in either region.

Fewer Leaders

Except for the larger presbyteries in the denomination, the leadership crunch has been nearly as severe as the financial crunch. In many ways, the two are closely related.

Because of tighter budgets, an increasing number of congregations are finding it difficult to afford a full-time pastor. In many regions, there is a shortage of Presbyterian ministers to serve our churches. This is not true everywhere, but in several regions, executive presbyters report churches being served by non-Presbyterian pastors. Certified lay pastors are filling more pulpits. Presbytery subsidies to support pastoral salaries (called “aid to fields” decades ago) have dried up. As mentioned earlier, more benevolence dollars are being kept at the session level to support local mission and church operations

Most presbyteries have merged congregations or have experienced a congregation’s life coming to an end, with more such endings on the horizon. Many have formed an increasing number of union or federated churches. Presbytery staffs have been downsized. Several presbyteries wonder whether they will be able to afford a full-time executive presbyter. And, in most places, fewer and fewer people are available for elected roles.

No longer business as usual

It is safe to say that it is definitely **not** “business as usual” in our presbyteries. In presbytery after presbytery, I heard stories of taking a “sabbatical” from the old structure of the presbytery and doing only those ecclesiastical things that our polity requires. Two reasons are given for taking this sabbatical:

- too few people are available to do the work of the presbytery, and

- we need to step away from all our mission and structure to develop a new vision or focus for the presbytery, since we cannot afford to do what we used to do.

Other presbyteries have not taken a sabbatical, but have undertaken processes to discern their mission, vision, and focus. In fact, one can hardly find a single presbytery that has not been involved in this enterprise.

The stories differ from place to place and context to context. However, some common patterns are emerging. The overriding pattern is that presbyteries and congregations are changing significantly. In place after place, congregations are focusing on their survival. As the stress of these dynamics intensifies, congregational conflicts rage. In some places, the denomination-wide conflict over sexuality and ordination has added fuel to these local struggles. Many executive presbyters see congregational leaders paralyzed by the stress and conflict. One described it as a lack of passion and vision. As a result of this, evangelism, discipleship, and stewardship all suffer.

The prevailing emotion through all of this change is grief. In both congregations and presbyteries, people express considerable grief over the loss of the “church” we used to have.

NEW PATTERNS EMERGING

As I indicated above, one can hardly find a presbytery that has not been involved in processes to discern a new, clear vision for the presbytery. The language may differ and the processes vary from place to place, but presbyteries everywhere are about envisioning a new purpose, mission, and focus for that governing body. In nearly every instance this is being done with broad participation within the presbytery and with the sessions.

Strengthening the old, starting the new

One common focus is emerging: Presbyteries in the PC(USA) today have as their major focus strengthening the congregations within their bounds. In places where resources are available, a second strong focus is on beginning new churches and fellowships.

In several presbyteries, the major activity in starting new churches is with racial ethnic groups. One cluster of three presbyteries, for example, has identified twenty-nine racial ethnic fellowships that are working in partnership with particular PC(USA) sessions within their presbyteries. Even where resources are scarce, presbyteries are seeing opportunities for new church development. One executive presbyter from a resource-scarce presbytery said they could start seven new churches next year if they had the funds. This executive presbyter believes that they will be starting none.

Congregational transformation

Those presbyteries that are able to break free from their own survival mentality have embarked on major efforts in congregational transformation. Some have gone as far as indicating that they will work with (and fund) only churches that are serious about engaging in transformation.

To move in this direction is very difficult for presbyteries, since program funds are so scarce and staffing cuts have left few dollars to employ presbytery staff to lead these efforts. Some executive presbyters see themselves to be in a vicious cycle: Churches need to be transformed so that they can be healthy and grow (spiritually, economically, and in membership), which requires money, staff, and presbytery committee support. If such transformation does not occur, the presbytery will become increasingly weak. But, as already mentioned, funds, staff, and volunteer leadership are scarce, which leads to considerable frustration about how to break this cycle. In several synods and presbyteries, experiments are underway to discover new methods of congregational transformation that do not require the heavy use of money and staff resources.

New patterns for presbyteries

Presbyteries are developing new patterns of life together. Many have begun intentional processes to build trust and a sense of community in the presbytery. Some examples that I heard include:

- fellowship days
- pastor-spouse gatherings
- overnight presbytery meetings
- church officer training networks
- online meetings to share information, resources, and concerns

Congregations are being encouraged to network with other congregations, form clusters, and share resources. Innovation and “thinking outside the box” are emphasized. Local efforts at partnership with other churches is lifted up and enabled by the presbyteries. I hear a significant increase in local level ecumenical partnerships, especially with churches in our Formula of Agreement. In addition, presbyteries are developing new mission partnerships, both here in the PC(USA), and especially abroad.

Presbytery meetings are taking on a different character. Nearly every presbytery reports that major blocks of “presbytery meeting” time are now spent in a combination of worship, spiritual life or spiritual development, fellowship, education, and celebration of mission. “Doing the work of the presbytery,” that is, the actual decision making, is clearly taking a backseat to these other items. Commissions and committees are being given more authority to act in their areas, and presbytery councils are becoming more important as coordinating and deciding bodies. Overnight presbytery meetings provide bigger blocks of time to these community-building efforts. At least one presbytery is translating

presbytery gatherings and meetings into three languages to enable communication and participation. As for accomplishing the presbytery's mission tasks, many presbyteries operate these days with task forces designed to accomplish certain mission activities, which makes it unnecessary to maintain a heavy bureaucratic structure to get things done.

With the increasing focus on congregations, it is not surprising that presbyteries are being more intentional and rigorous in screening ministers who are receiving calls in the presbytery. Nearly all presbyteries are conducting more thorough reference checks. Many are implementing credit and/or criminal checks. The point of this rigorous screening is not to be hard on ministers, but to do whatever is possible to guarantee solid pastoral leadership for these chaotic times.

In nearly every region of the church, presbyteries are working together with other presbyteries. Several of the new synod designs (such as Northeast, Covenant, and Trinity) are constructed with partnership of presbyteries as the central focus of the design. As presbyteries move past survival attitudes, they are able to see how partnering with another governing body can strengthen the support and resources they are able to provide for their churches. Again, we see here the focus on congregations.

This paper would not be complete without mentioning the high concern about communication throughout the church. Good, reliable information is needed at every governing body level from and about every other governing body level, so that the dynamics of suspicion and distrust can be countered. In the conversations I had with executive presbyters, we were not in a "problem-solving" mode that developed answers as the best methods and processes. However, the concern for good communication was shared everywhere I went.

A FINAL WORD

The final paragraph of this paper is a tribute to my colleagues who serve in these executive/general presbyter and synod executive roles. They are men and women of strong faith and great integrity, with a high sense of being called to the ministries in which they serve. They make their witness through their work in these roles, often serving in difficult and stressful circumstances, striving always to build up the body of Christ for the important work of ministry. I thank God for their dedication and for the partnership we share in this ministry!