

# SYNOD OF THE PACIFIC (PCUSA) REPORT OF THE SYNOD EXECUTIVE

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There are currently a number of new and exciting things happening within the Synod of the Pacific. Already today and throughout this synod meeting, you will be hearing from task forces and committees regarding their proposals and recommendations designed to improve the way we support ministry in this region of the PC (U.S.A.). Therefore, I will focus my remarks today on a couple of things taking place outside our synod that have important implications for us as well as our sister synods, all presbyteries, and the General Assembly Council. Thus, it is important for you as synod commissioners to be aware of them.

The primary item I wish to address is the Form of Government report, or as it is affectionately referred to, the FOG Report. The FOG Task Force's responsibility, given to them by the 217<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2006), was to present a proposed revision to the Form of Government to the 218<sup>th</sup> General Assembly meeting in 2008. As stated by that task force, "integral to [our] work is feedback from across the church." The deadline for receiving feedback is the next meeting in November, with their final draft due in December. I have asked the Synod Coordinating Council to consider appointing a Task Force from amongst our Synod Commissioners who would have the interest and time to gather feedback from within our synod and present it in written form to the FOG Task Force prior to their November meeting. I believe that the synod executive forum may put together a collective response to the report of the task force, however this will not happen until next January or February.

For those of you that may not have had the chance to read this report, I would like to point out some of the proposed changes that may impact our synod, most of which are found in Section III. The four governing bodies of the church will be referred to as "councils" consisting of the session, the presbytery, the synod, and the General Assembly. There is already debate about the use of the word "councils" as opposed to governing bodies. The councils are all called to share with others both within and beyond the congregation the task of bearing witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the world, keeping in mind the six great ends of the church, and the notes by which Presbyterian and Reformed communities have identified themselves throughout history. The report states that, *"Congregations of the PCUSA, while possessing all the gifts necessary to be the church, are nonetheless not sufficient in themselves to be the church. Rather, they are called to share with others both within and beyond the congregation the task of bearing witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ."*

The power and responsibilities being proposed by the FOG Task Force to accomplish this is different for each of the councils. Synods would have the responsibility and power to

- a. *provide that the Word is truly proclaimed and heard.* This responsibility may include (emphasis is mine) developing, in conjunction with its presbyteries, a broad strategy for the mission of the church... The current Book of Order states the synods shall develop a broad strategy for mission. This is a subtle but significant change. The Book of Order further states synods may assist its member presbyteries, when requested in matters related to calling, ordaining, and placement of ministers of the Word and Sacrament; establishing and maintaining, in conjunction with its presbyteries, ecumenical relationships...; facilitating joint action in mission with other denominations and agencies

in its region; facilitating communication among its presbyteries and between its presbyteries and the General Assembly; (it is in this area that I believe the importance of the role of synod to help achieve effective communication between the presbyteries and their congregations and the General Assembly is most pronounced); providing services for presbyteries within its area that can be performed more effectively from a broad regional base (for our synod this would be our administrative and financial services).

- b. *provide that the Sacraments are rightly administered...*
- c. *nurture the covenant community through the upright ministry of ecclesiastical discipline.*  
This responsibility is the implementation of the Rules of Discipline.

*"The synod has a responsibility to maintain regular and continuing relationship with the General Assembly..."* The same statement is made of presbyteries regarding their relationship with synods and General Assembly. The General Assembly has a responsibility to maintain relationships with the presbyteries by consulting with them. However, there is no mention of GA consulting with synods. Rather, GA fulfills its responsibilities to synods through:

1. *Overseeing the work of synods;*
2. *reviewing the records of synods;*
3. *organizing, dividing, uniting synods;*
4. *approving the acts of synods to organize and divide presbyteries.*

Unfortunately, this foretells that the current culture existing in the GAC which too often results in synods being ignored in meaningful communications and consultations may be perpetuated in the new form of government.

Another proposed change is entitled "Reduced Function". It states, *"When a two-thirds majority of its constituent presbyteries so decide, the function of a synod may be reduced but shall in no case be less than the provision of judicial process and administrative review of the work of the presbyteries... Constituent presbyteries of such a synod shall assume for themselves, by mutual agreement, such other synod functions as may be deemed necessary by the presbyteries."*

Further change of interest is under "Finances". The only budget referred to is a "General Mission Budget." The report states, *"the administration of mission demonstrates the unity and interdependence of the church, in that councils share with one another responsibilities, rights, and powers. The funding of mission similarly demonstrates the unity of the church."* But then it also states, *"Councils more inclusive than the session may request funds for their mission and for essential operational functions. Presbyteries may apportion requested funds to sessions within their bounds."* It is my sense that this permissive language related to what we now call per capita will further lead to sessions withholding per capita. The potential elimination of per capita, along with increased designation of mission support funds, will continue to negatively impact the ability of presbyteries, synods, and the GA to administrate mission. The direction we are heading, and the potential result, seems to be the polar opposite of the statement above that *"the administration and funding of mission demonstrates the unity and interdependence of the church."*

I was told by one Synod Executive that, during the OGA Polity Conference held last week, there were a number of questions being raised about the report. There seems to be uncertainty about whether or not the report will pass. It is my understanding that the GAC will be recommending to next year's General Assembly that a two year study be done before the report is voted on. I think there are some positive things in the FOG Report and I thank the task force for their efforts to try to simplify a book that has become less than helpful in many instances. 'Some of the proposed

changes clearly take responsibilities away from synods and have the potential of reducing their role to one that is only ecclesiastical. This may be the direction that the majority of the church wishes to travel, and if that is their wish, so be it. I simply want you as synod commissioners to be aware of what is being proposed so you can make informed decisions and not be surprised by what may happen in the future. If you have not read the entire FOG report, you can access it through the PCUSA website.

Briefly, I would like to share with you the status of one other ongoing endeavor. About a year ago, the GAC asked the synod and presbytery executives to join with both members and staff of GAC in a series of conversations around the future of middle governing bodies, i.e. synods and presbyteries. Out of the first meeting came the mantra "A New Way for a New Day". Guest speakers, like Gil Rendle from the Alban Institute, were brought in to help us try to understand how, we, as executives, needed to change our approach to providing leadership to our presbyteries and synods in a time of deep change in all denominations; uncertain answers; and considerable chaos. After the first meeting or two, there was mixed reaction to the conversations. A few executives stopped coming to the gatherings; some were not satisfied with the results but were hopeful they would lead to something useful and positive, and so they continue to attend the gatherings; and some thought they were very fruitful.

The most recent meeting was held last month in Louisville under the heading "Moving from Conversation, through Challenge, towards Change." Unfortunately, for many of the synod executives in attendance, it was not a good experience. All the presenters were presbytery executives and GAC staff. None were synod executives. Most of the discussion questions utilized in breakout groups assigned the task of discussing a variety of topics, did not mention or include synods. As one synod executive stated in an email to the Moderator of the GAC and the Executive Director of the GAC, *"I don't remember the last time I attended a meeting where I was made to feel so invisible. I am supportive of most of the work of the GAC, and sometimes we get it right, but this time we did not."* I concur with this synod executive's observations. Until the culture of the church changes, and recognizes that as long as synods are one of the partners in ministry along with the GAC, presbyteries, and congregations, and should be treated inclusively with the other governing bodies, in my opinion we will continue to struggle with how we effectively function, connect, and communicate as a denomination.

Again, I encourage you to get a copy of the Form of Government Report and study it carefully.