

Time for Something New

White Paper

January 7, 2011

Conflict has debilitated the PCUSA. A group of pastors has become convinced that remaining locked in unending controversy will continue a slow demise, dishonoring our calling, offering a poor legacy to those we hope will follow us. We humbly share responsibility for the failure of our storied denomination. We are no better as pastors and no more righteous than anyone on the other side of issues. We have tolerated what we regard as theological error and biblical drift far too long, hoping something would change for the better. How we got to this sad place becomes less important than how to move forward.

We are determined to get past rancorous, draining internal disputes that paralyze a common life. *We believe we will not survive without drastic intervention. We are ready to do something different, TO THRIVE as the Body of Christ. We call others of like mind to envision a new future for congregations who share our Presbyterian, Reformed, Evangelical heritage. If the denomination has the ability and will to move in this new direction, we will rejoice. Regardless, a group of us will change course, forming a new way for our congregations to relate.* We are excited about how God wants us to engage in ministry to the world. We hate the thought of being schismatic – but the PCUSA is in a state of division already. This proposal only acknowledges the sadly divided denomination we have become.

THE SITUATION: The PCUSA is in trouble on many fronts. The denomination has been in steady decline for 45 years, and virtually every meaningful statistical category is down. When the numbers are in for 2010, we will certainly have less than 2 million members (2009 – 2,077,138 members). Baptisms of infants are less than half of what they were at reunion – reflecting a dramatic loss of young adults. Most congregations see far more funerals than infant baptisms because we are an aging denomination. Most PCUSA congregations are gradually growing smaller and smaller. Our “Wee Kirks” (less than 100 members) now account for 51% of our congregation. Only 1,500 of those 5,439 small congregations have an installed pastor, and their future viability as congregations is in doubt. We start precious few new congregations, averaging only 20 new congregations over the past 5 years. Even many larger congregations, which grew well for decades, have hit a season of plateau or decline. Presbyterians did well in attracting the “Builder” generation (born prior to 1946), but with each succeeding generation we have struggled to draw them into our congregations. People still join our congregations, but they then disappear. Since reunion we have moved over 2.5 million members to our inactive rolls.

Many Presbyteries and Synods are in financial difficulties. Aid-receiving Presbyteries are soon to lose that aid and likely lose significant staff. The way those courts of the church have functioned is soon to change. The GA has reduced staff steadily for the past 10 years. These reductions seem to signal a loss of trust within most of the PCUSA. It is very hard to measure the future effectiveness of the emerging leadership in the PCUSA,

given how few are under 40 years of age, it seems likely that it will be smaller than the generation now retiring.

The issue of homosexual ordination has been the flashpoint of controversy for the last 35 years. Yet, that issue – with its contentious “yes” and “no” votes - masks the more important issues that the PCUSA faces. Those larger, more nuanced issues revolve around differing understanding of scripture, authority, Christology (both the person and the work of Christ), the extent of salvation (creeping universalism), and a broader set of moral issues around which fracture lines appear. There are deep divisions within the PCUSA; opposing sides read different books and journals, attend different conferences, and support different causes. There is no longer a common understanding of what is meant by being “Reformed.” There is a growing sense that the only unity we have left is contained in the property clause and the pension plan. Some feel like per capita is a club used against them, while others feel locked into institutional captivity by the property clause. Outside of Presbytery meetings, we mostly exist in separate worlds. While everyone wearies of the battles over ordination, these battles divert us from a host of issues that affect the way our denomination fails to attract either young believers or those outside the faith. Thus, we age and shrink and become increasingly irrelevant.

Certainly none of these issues are unique to the PCUSA, but are all part of larger cultural forces. But what is the way forward? Is there a future beyond the decline as yet unseen? Is there a way to avoid endless fights, to regain consensus on the essence of the Christian faith? We see no plan coming from any quarter, leaving a continued drift into obsolescence.

We recognize that there are still islands of hope across the church, but they do not seem to represent a movement. Many faithful groups and organizations have been devoted to the renewal of the PCUSA, and they have offered valuable ministry for many years. Yet it appears they have simply helped slow down a larger story of decline. Is it time to acknowledge that something in the PCUSA system is dying?

We need something new, characterized by **Passions and Values**:

1. A **united theological core** to which we subscribe, aligned with classic biblical, Reformed/Evangelical tradition, and a pledge to live according to those beliefs, regardless of cultural pressures to conform.
2. A commitment to **nurture leadership** in local congregations, which we believe is the primary locus of the expression of the Kingdom of God. We will identify, develop, and train a new generation of leaders – both clergy and laity.
3. A passion to share in the **larger Mission of the people of God** around the world, especially among the least, the lost, and the left behind.
4. A dream of **multiplying healthy communities** of faith throughout North America
5. A pattern of fellowship reflecting the realities of our scattered life and joint mission, through regular gatherings locally, regionally and nationally, which excite our ability to dream together.

Values:

1. A minimalist governmental structure
2. Clarity on property issues – property and assets to reside under the stewardship of the local Session. Dues/Gifts for common administration should allow and enable continued affiliation among these congregations.
3. Rather than large institutional structures, we propose joint ventures with specialized ministries as congregations deem helpful (current PCUSA Missions may be a source of joint support, aspects of the Board of Pensions, Presbyterian Foundation, PFR conferences, Outreach Foundation, etc).
4. An atmosphere of support for congregations both within and without the PCUSA.

PROPOSAL: We offer three options to consider, and suggest we pursue each concurrently.

1) An Association of Congregations

The most immediate thing we can do is to form an Association of Presbyterian Churches to join together pastors, elders, congregations, and believers, who affirm our historic confessions with integrity. *The primary purpose of this association will be the encouragement of local churches to live out the good news proclaimed by our Savior, increasing the impact of the Kingdom of Heaven.* We long for a church where the Bible is seen through a common lens. We yearn for gatherings of Spirit-inspired congregations in common Mission. We must re-engage the culture with the life-giving good news of the Gospel, and long for a church willing to stand for truth despite the cries of the culture to accommodate. We long for a church that is alive to the winds of the Holy Spirit in our midst. We long for relationships with colleagues built upon trust and common vision. We long to support churches of all sizes and focus on leadership development at all levels of the church. We expect to see a denomination that encourages racial-ethnic congregations to express their faith in creative ways within their cultural contexts. We anticipate great connection to our Global Mission partners who have been bewildered at the drift in our current expressions.

An Association will still exist within our current Presbyteries for the time being, but energies and resources will begin to flow in new directions. In many ways this association may resemble some of the voluntary organizations of the past (PGF, PFR, etc.) but it is only a way station to something else. It is an intermediate tool to begin to bring together like minded congregations and pastors to begin the work of another future, different than the current PCUSA.

2) New Synod/Presbyteries

In the near future we will need a place within the PCUSA to exist with freedom to express our values with a freedom from the expected ordination changes that will exist in the PCUSA. More importantly, we long for Presbyteries where we have theological and missional consensus rather than fundamental disagreement over so many core issues of theology. We need COM and CPM functions that express who we are. We recognize that invitation to the next generation of leadership must be structured differently than the current model, which unintentionally weeds out entrepreneurial persons desperately needed for tomorrow's church. Beyond those functions, much of the planning of how the

Synod/Presbyteries will depend upon how many congregations join together. Many functions, like curriculum and mission relationships, have become less centralized already. We will begin work with the Middle Governing Bodies Commission, searching for ways to be this new entity within the PCUSA. Likely several changes to *The Book of Order* will be needed to step fully into this reality.

3) Possible New Reformed Body

New Presbyteries that still remain in a denomination which enacts change we strongly oppose may be an insurmountable problem for many. Some members of our Association will feel the need for an entity apart from the current PCUSA. Hence, it is likely that a new body will need to be created which can exist beyond the boundary of the PCUSA, but which could remain in correspondence with the PCUSA.

We believe it may be possible for a New Body outside the bounds of the PCUSA to relate to a new Synod. We want to have strong and historic linkages with any departing congregations. Whatever structure emerges, we will strive to serve congregations which today are in the PCUSA. While a strong confessional stance will connect these “in” and “out” congregations, the wall between will be permeable and allow congregations to be participants in the association and supportive of it even if not a full member. All kinds of possibilities exist, and much will depend on how supportive the PCUSA can be in allowing something new to exist without punitive action.

4) Re-Creation of the PCUSA

While each of the 3 proposals above may prove to be our next steps, we intend to continue conversations with other groups within the PCUSA to consider re-making the whole thing. We think the denomination no longer provides a viable future. We know that the Covenant Network also sees a broken system for different reasons. We will work together on the longer and more difficult project of seeing how something new might serve the whole church.

Short Term Goals:

1. Work with the MGB Commission to explore ways of being in new Synod/Presbyteries.
2. Plan an Event in August 2011 to begin to draw together the like-hearted (August 25-27, 2011?)
3. Work with different constituencies to reverse the Property clause toward the goal of easing exit.
4. Appeal to the Board of Pension to delay their current discussion of the extension of benefits while we remain deeply divided on the issue.
5. Support current standards for ordination, while believing neither short-term victory nor defeat are signs this impasse will be resolved by voting.

Conclusion:

Any model that includes an entity outside the PCUSA does mean fewer remaining congregations, pastors and elders to fight the challenges of the PCUSA. Votes will swing in directions which had not been desirable before. For many this is a simple

acknowledgement that fighting is not the way we choose to proceed. We hope to discover and model what a new “Reformed body” might look like in the coming years. Our goal is not institutional survival but effective faithfulness, fully participating in the world-wide church. We invite you to consider joining us, stepping faithfully, boldly and joyfully into the work for which God has called us.

We propose this change with regret, despising division and all it entails in witness to the world, but with excitement at what may emerge. We are not angry, and share responsibility for the rupture of fellowship. We have allowed a “broadening” church for so long that health has left us, and together we must re-discover our calling and identity in Christ. We firmly believe the best days of Christ’s church are ahead. We believe that attaining a degree of separation may allow growth to begin again. Each side of the church is hurt by the fighting. In our role as God’s ambassadors of reconciliation, may the world see the love of God! May God be glorified, and bless this Church.