

A Pastoral Concern for the PC (USA) From the Presbytery Pastoral Care Network

Those of us who have been working to promote clergy care within the variety of presbyteries across the PC (USA) have been discussing our shared pastoral concerns for the health of church leaders who serve, not only congregations, but presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly in particular.

These are difficult and stressful days for those who serve in presbytery, synod, and General Assembly staff positions. In many ways, these governing bodies (councils) are experiencing widespread fragmentation and even disintegration in terms of the levels of ministry they once embodied. Budget short-falls, staff reductions, program cut-backs, and reductions in benevolence giving within many presbyteries have become a chronic issue over the past decade or more. As Presbyterians today debate controversial ethical issues about how to address changing cultural patterns, presbyteries have often become theological battlegrounds rather than mission-oriented expressions of the larger church. The levels of discontent expressed by some congregations about the decisions made by the larger church add to the stress that presbytery staff persons have to manage.

The pressures that these discontents and budgetary crises create for many of our presbytery leaders and staff members are enormous. As our denomination moves towards more congregationally-based ways of doing ministry, the looming disintegration of the traditional ways of structuring presbyteries and functioning as governing councils become more apparent. There is also an amazing amount of silence within the larger Church about the anxieties that are prevalent today among leaders within our presbyteries, synods and the General Assembly. As staff reductions continue to occur within governing councils, some presbytery and synod staff persons realize that they will need to serve local parishes in order to have a job. The current “glut” of ministers who are seeking calls to a declining number of full-time church positions exacerbates the anxieties that exist today within the PC(USA).

The degree of the disintegration we see going on today is not consistent among all presbyteries or synods. Some smaller and more theologically homogeneous presbyteries manage to function fairly well in the more traditional ways of doing ministry. Some larger presbyteries are experimenting with more adaptive ways of embracing the theological diversity and missional orientations of the congregations they seek to support and serve.

Many of us who care deeply about the future of the PC(USA) find ourselves lamenting the fragmentation, discontents, and changes that are taking place around the denomination. Others believe that the current upheaval and crises in the PC(USA) will bring about new opportunities for ministry in the rapidly changing culture of the 21st century. Some presbyteries are responding to these issues by looking for opportunities to create congregational partnerships, sister church connections, and by having presbytery staff work as congregational consultants.

The PPCN, working on behalf of the care and support of church professionals with the PC(USA), seeks to exercise pastoral care for presbytery, synod, and GA staff in this time of disintegration, change, and opportunity. We are deeply concerned about the anxiety, lament, and yearnings that the leaders and staff of our governing bodies are experiencing and how the disintegration of the old governing council structures impacts both their spiritual and vocational well-being.

To that end, the PPCN would like to promote an open conversation/forum among presbytery, synod, and GA staff where these issues and feelings can be addressed together in order to find new ways of “being friends among our colleagues in ministry” as we work toward making the adaptive changes necessary for the PC(USA) to thrive in the future. We would welcome the opportunity to host such a conversation/forum in pastoral care and concern for those who are serving the church.