

BEING THE CHURCH TOGETHER: REFLECTIONS ON CONCILIAR RELATIONS IN A MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY

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The particular churches of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) wherever they are, taken collectively, constitute one church. (G-4.0301a)

The nature of Presbyterian order is such that it shares power and responsibility. The system of governing bodies, whether they have authority over one or many churches, sustains such mutual relationships within the structures as to express the unity of the church. (G-4.0302)

The mutual interconnection of the church through its councils is a sign of the unity of the church. Congregations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 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 in the world. This call to bear witness is the work of all believers. The particular responsibility of the councils of the church is to nurture, guide, and govern those who witness as part of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), to the end that such witness strengthens the whole church and gives glory to God. (Proposed Form of Government, G-3.0101)

Introduction

I have been asked to reflect on two questions: what are the ministries the presbytery is uniquely positioned to address, and what implications does this have for the relationships between presbyteries and the General Assembly and perhaps for the church¹ as a whole? I undertake this assignment from the perspective of a missional ecclesiology.

Given the wide ranging and often conflicting uses of the term “missional” floating about in ecclesiastical parlance, perhaps a definition is in order. I use the term “missional” as a way of claiming the truth articulated by Jürgen Moltmann:

It is not the Church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill to the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the Church²

To put it another way, the Church is called into being by the action of the Triune God in the world – the Father acting through the Son in the power of the Spirit to redeem, reconcile, and ultimately to recreate the world according to the divine intent. The Church is *sent* into its particular context (the etymological root of “mission” is the Latin word *mitto* – “to send”) in the world by this Triune God. The Church’s *sole reason for existence* is to bear witness to and participate in the *missio Dei* – the eternal coming of God into the world for the sake of the world – as a community of witness and service in the name of Christ to the glory of God.

¹ Throughout the text of this paper, except in quoted material, I will use the capitalized term “Church” to connote the Church Catholic, the whole Church of Jesus Christ, and the lower-case term “church” to connote a denomination (except where used as part of the title, i.e., “The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)”). In place of the colloquial use of the term “church” to connote a local gathering of believers, I will use the term “congregation.”

² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*. Trans. M. Kohl. Philadelphia Press, 1975, p. 64.

This means, as I see it, that the calling of the Church, and of any church or congregation, is to be a community of witness and service within its context. It is not the calling of the Church, or of any church or congregation, to promote its own agenda or to seek the guarantee of its own survival.

It means, as I see it, that the beating heart of the Church, and of any church, is the congregation, into which are gathered those whom God calls to faith in Christ by the power of the Spirit. Every Christian is a minister and has ministry of service and witness to others in the name of Christ, a ministry that takes place in a congregational context. There are no Christians in isolation. Every Christian's ministry is joined to the ministry of others as part of the whole people of God.

It means, as I see it, that the some Christians are called and ordered to particular ministries whose purpose is to strengthen the witness of each Christian and all Christians. Those ministries, whether of service, compassion, and justice (deacons); of order, discipline, and discernment (ruling elder); or of teaching the faith and equipping the saints for their ministry (teaching elders) are distinct only in function, and not in substance, from the ministry of every believer.

And it means, as I see it, that the role of councils (governing bodies) – those elders gathered together in increasing order of inclusion for the purpose of wrestling with questions of theology and discernment in the life of the church – is to nurture, guide, and govern the ministry of congregations, to the glory of God.

None of this is innovative. In fact, a missional ecclesiology represents a restatement of some of the oldest ideas in Reformed faith. None of this represents a program for change or growth, nor does it carry with it a guarantee of either. It is rather a theological frame of reference from which I (and others) think about the church.

Now to the questions:

What are the ministries the presbytery is uniquely positioned to accomplish?

A missional ecclesiology has a significant impact on the role of the presbytery, at least as we have come to understand that role over the last quarter century in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). If we take seriously the missional notions that the church exists to witness to and serve the *missio Dei* in its particular contexts, and that the congregation is the locus of mission in the life of the church, then we must overturn at least one assumption about the role of the presbytery: that the presbytery is an agent of mission that is in some way distinct from the mission of the congregation. We do this at least in part because the context of the presbytery *is* its congregations.

Joseph Small, in his study “The Travail of the Presbytery” points to the 1970 and 1972 reorganizations of the two antecedent denominations of the current PC(USA) as the moment at which this assumption took shape. Born of the missional impulse that “church structures exist for mission and must be designed for mission,” the denominational reorganizations nonetheless went astray:

Rather than supporting the mission of congregations, including support for the congregations' teaching and ruling elders, presbyteries were expected to develop and carry out their own mission. Not surprisingly, presbyteries as autonomous mission agencies required staffing at an unprecedented level, and large staffs required larger presbyteries and synods to support them. Synods, which had

tended to follow state boundaries, became regional, multi-state bodies composed of presbyteries of increased geographic size, with increased numbers of churches, members, and ministers.³

Small notes several problematic ecclesiological shifts. First, he notes the increasing clericalization in the church, and the concomitant diminution of the role and importance of the elder and deacon. This has resulted, Small suggests, in the conviction on the part of elders and deacons that their service to the church is somehow secondary to and dependant on that of the minister. Second, he notes that the expansion in program, staff, and size of presbyteries has actually increased both the distance from and the tensions with congregations, as more and more pressure is put on congregations to subscribe the presbytery's "mission budget." Third, the church's approach to its polity has become increasingly regulatory in nature, leading to growing lists of unrelated responsibilities assigned to governing bodies (see the twenty-seven point list of presbytery responsibilities in G-11.0103). The result of these shifts is that a reorganization aimed at mission has actually made the church less missional than ever.

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Presbyteries thus find themselves in a well-documented crunch,⁴ having to support a large and varied program life with shrinking staff and dwindling budgets. In many places, the presbytery as agent of mission is giving way to the presbytery of minimum function. Over the past decade, numerous presbyteries have trimmed their committee structure to the minimum permitted by the current *Book of Order* (see G-9.0902a), reduced staff to a stated clerk and minimal administrative support, and ceased to offer anything in the way of support to congregations in crisis or pastoral transition. Yet even this has often proven unsatisfactory, and has led many elders to wonder precisely what the presbytery has to offer in return for their contributions to its "mission."

All this crunching has led a few of our more thoughtful ecclesiologists to ask, what are the unique functions of the presbytery? Is it possible to identify these functions and to extrapolate from them a vision for the presbytery? What do our history, polity, and our ecclesiology have to offer in answer to this question?

In the study cited above, Small argues that

Modern presbyteries have developed from two ecclesial institutions in Calvin's Geneva: the Geneva Consistory and the Venerable Company of Pastors. The Consistory, composed of pastors and elders, was responsible for church order and discipline. The Company of Pastors was responsible for examination and ordination of ministers, continuing biblical and theological education, mutual theological and ethical encouragement, and missionary work in neighboring countries.⁵

Small goes on to suggest that we might find a clue to the look of the faithful presbytery in the work of Calvin's Venerable Company of Pastors. The Venerable Company provided two key resources for the life of the early Reformed community:

1) a commitment to theological collegiality, and

³ Joseph Small, "The Travail of the Presbytery." Available on the PC(USA) website: www.pcusa.org/mgbconnect/pubs/travail.pdf, p.7

⁴ See Gary D. Torrens' fine study, "Is There a Presbytery Crunch?" Available on the PC(USA) website: www.pcusa.org/mgbconnect/pubs/pbycrunch.pdf.

⁵ Small, *op cit*, p.4

- 2) a disciplined community whose members submitted themselves to the practice of mutual encouragement and counsel.⁶

The earliest presbyteries in the colonial America defined the primary functions of the presbytery in a similar manner. A review of the records of the presbyteries of New York and Philadelphia in the eighteenth century indicates that they spend their time engaged in three primary tasks:

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- 1) Recruiting ministers from England and Scotland, and identifying and educating candidates for ministry from among the congregations in the new world;
- 2) Founding new congregations in the expanding westward frontier; and
- 3) Caring for existing congregations, especially those in crisis or pastoral transition.⁷

To what extent are these same functions visible in the current *Book of Order*? I would argue that the list of presbytery responsibilities in G-11.0103a-aa reflects these same three core tasks, with some additions. I would suggest that the present list of twenty-seven responsibilities could be grouped as follows:

- 1) *Addressing the mission of the church in its district:*
 - a. developing a strategy for mission
 - b. coordinating the work of member congregations
 - c. initiating mission in light of the strategy of synod and GA
 - h. organizing and receiving new congregations and uniting existing congregations
 - i. dividing, dismissing, or dissolving congregations
 - j. controlling the location of congregations
- 2) *Caring for existing congregations:*
 - g. providing pastoral care for congregations, visiting sessions
 - k. taking special oversight of congregations without pastors
 - r. serving in judicial matters
 - s. assuming original jurisdictions when session cannot exercise authority
 - x. reviewing session minutes and records annually
 - y. considering and acting on congregational requests involving real property
- 3) *Providing leadership:*
 - f. providing encouragement and guidance in leadership development and training
 - l. entering into covenant relations with those preparing for ministry
 - m. electing readers of ordination examinations
 - n. receiving, ordaining, dismissing, installing and removing ministers
 - o. establishing and dissolving pastoral relationships
 - p. designating ministers to work in valid, non-parish based ministries
 - q. caring for and commissioning those preparing for service in the church
 - z. authorizing elders to administer the Lord's Supper.

⁶ Small, *op.cit.*, pp.12-13.

⁷ I am indebted for this information to Rev. Graham Hart and his unpublished paper study of early American presbyteries, "Learning from Early Presbyteries."

One can argue that particular functions as described in G-11.0103a-aa are perhaps unnecessary or contributive to bureaucratic torpor. It appears, however, that the commitment to the core functions of mission, leadership, and congregational care that characterized early American presbyteries still echoes, however faintly, in the job description of the modern church.⁸

Do these same three core functions fit in a missional view of the presbytery? An analysis of our present context would suggest that they do. Congregations are increasingly facing the fact that the techniques and practices of the past do not halt the decline in participation and financial support they are experiencing. While some are choosing to cling to old models despite their obvious inadequacy – to die rather than to change – others are asking what it might mean to leave behind their absorption in institutional survival and expend themselves in ministry and mission. In so choosing they are discovering that they need support from others who are engaged in similar adventures, to compare notes and best practices. They are looking at their communities in new ways, as places *into which* they are called to follow Christ rather than places *from which* they retreat to seek spiritual safety and refuge. And they are sensing the need for leadership that is able to think theologically and to translate that theology into action. Transforming the mindset of the congregation, re-envisioning the context as a place of missional engagement rather than a threat to religious security, reinventing the skill set of leadership – are these the job description of the twenty-first century American PC(USA) presbytery?

Darrell L. Guder appears to think so. Guder, arguably the leading scholar of the missional theology movement, addressed the same question of the unique functions of the presbytery in a missional context in a recent essay that is part of the Missional Presbytery Project. In his essay, Guder identifies three core tasks of a presbytery that wishes to nurture a commitment to missional ecclesiology on the part of its congregations:

- 1) *Fostering mutual accountability for the shared missional vocation of each congregation*, in which congregations are assisted through mutual support to move beyond a focus on self and survival toward an engagement with the community in effective witness to the gospel;
- 2) *Fostering missional reflection on the distinctive character of the shared mission field*, in which congregations are encouraged to share with one another in reflection on the particular needs, obstacles, challenges, and opportunities before them in mission; and
- 3) *Fostering the formation of missional leadership*, in which presbyteries and congregations reclaim core Reformed convictions about the priority of biblical and theological scholarship for

⁸ Such a grouping leaves unassigned several other functions, many of which appear to reflect organizational concerns or the church's commitment to social justice:

- a. implementing principles of participation, inclusiveness, and affirmative action
- b. guaranteeing representation on session of all congregational constituencies
- t. maintaining regular relationship with higher governing bodies
- u. establishing and maintaining ecumenical relationships
- v. establishing and superintending agencies necessary to its work
- w. establishing a nominating committee
- aa. dealing with issues of racism and racial oppression

The taxonomy described in the main text is not intended to question the validity of these concerns, or to suggest that they are not appropriate responsibilities for presbyteries.

teaching elders, the commitment to discernment and compassion among ruling elders and deacons.⁹

What can be learned from all this? Admittedly, broad generalizations are suspicious at best and more likely dangerous. Nonetheless, there does appear to be a set of themes emerging. This review of history, polity, and missional theology suggests that the presbytery has a unique and irreplaceable role in

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- 1) *Mission Planning*: Discerning the call of the mission of God and providing for the proclamation of the gospel of the reign of God within its district;
- 2) *Leadership Development*: Recruiting, training, deploying, and nurturing ministers as teachers of the faith and equippers of the people; training elders and deacons for their role in guiding and discerning the faithfulness of congregational witness; and offering leadership development opportunities to congregations; and
- 3) *Congregational Care*: Supporting congregations through the process of missional transformation, assisting congregations in crisis and pastoral transition, and networking congregations together to address common missional concerns.¹⁰

How particular presbyteries address these core tasks will, of course, be conditioned by the contexts in which they exist.¹¹ But there appears to be both historical and theological warrant for seeing the presbytery as the place to which Presbyterian congregations look for answers to these needs.

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⁹ Darrell L. Guder, “A Missional Context,” unpublished draft, pp.9-12.

¹⁰ The proposed Form of Government (see www.pcusa.org/formofgovernment) offers a related approach. It understands the core ministries of all four councils of the church in terms of the classical Reformation notes: proclamation of the Word, administration of the sacraments, and nurture of the covenant community through ecclesiastical discipline. The proposed Form understands the ministries broadly and missionally, and so it is easy to see within them the same core functions we are describing here for the presbytery.

A missional view of proclamation moves beyond preaching on Sunday morning to include the witness to the gospel by the whole people of God as they are sent into the community. Thus, providing for the proclamation of the Word would easily include what we are describing here as “mission planning.”

A missional view of the administration of the sacraments moves beyond liturgical practice; it sees the sacraments as constitutive of congregational life and as the foundation for congregational ministries of compassion and justice. Thus, a concern for the proper administration of the sacraments would include the strengthening and transformation of congregations as missional communities.

A missional view of ecclesiastical discipline moves beyond discipline as the mere application of judicial process; it understands the heart of discipline to be the making and nurturing of disciples. Thus, the development of leadership – especially as it includes the education and preparation of elders, deacons, and members of congregations – contributes directly to the nurture of a “disciplined” covenant community.

¹¹ The Presbytery of St. Augustine, in the wake of its recent strategic review of its ministry, is in the process of reorganizing itself to reflect these three core ministries. A basic description of the plan is appended to this paper.

If mission planning, leadership development, and congregational care are the responsibilities of the presbytery, what is the role of the higher councils of the church, especially that of the General Assembly and its entities?

Let me start with a premise: The Church necessarily exists both as congregations and as more inclusive councils (governing bodies). This seems to me to be true both historically and theologically.

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Historically, the Church was composed first of particular communities in particular locations: Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, Rome, etc. However, early on these disparate communities recognized that they shared a fundamental unity in the “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Eph.4:4-6). That unity was overarching and life-giving, and so quite early in the life of the Church threats to that unity were seen to require responses that spoke for the entire church, rather than simply for individual congregations. Thus, in Acts 15 the Jerusalem Council responded on behalf of the whole Church to persons who sought to impose on the various communities an orthopraxy (circumcision and calendrical observance) that many regarded as foreign and burdensome. In its decision the Jerusalem Council sought to negotiate between the polarities of antinomianism (no requirement of adherence to the law) and legalism (strict requirement of circumcision and kosher practice), permitting some variance from traditional Jewish behavior while insisting on the maintenance of what the council regarded as essentials of faith and life. In so doing, the council established a creative tension between core standards and local accommodation, a tension that has characterized the institutional life of the Church ever since.

Theologically, this unifying tension is cast in clearest relief in missional ecclesiology.¹² Missional theology is rooted in the commitment to the local congregation as the basic unit of mission, but it acknowledges that mission does not remain a congregational phenomenon. Darrell Guder expresses it this way:

The theological formation of the missional connectedness of the church should be centrifugal in nature. In terms of its biblical and theological approach, it should move outward from the particular communities to the wholeness of the church in all its diversity. This is an important dimension of the priority of the particular mission community in both our theology and our practice.¹³

Part of what makes this “centrifugal” missional connectedness necessary is the church’s tendency toward reductionism. Christian movements from the New Testament through the Reformation are born in the fires of passion and insight, and they see the global and transformational claims of the faith they proclaim. Like the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, though, the instinct of the faithful community over time is always to “build booths” that will manage the mystery of our transcendent experience, containing the uncontainable. In the wake of the insight of revelation, we are prone to retrenchment, codification, and defensiveness. The danger constantly confronting the Church, Guder claims, is our temptation to manage the claims of the gospel, to reduce them to the “individual and personal dimensions of salvation”:

¹² See, for instance, Guder’s “Missional Connectedness: The Community of Communities in Mission” in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, D. Guder, ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, pp.248-268; or Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000, pp. 181-204, and references in both.

¹³ Guder, *Missional Church*, p.249.

This reduced gospel shaped a church with a reduced mission. It was now to be focused on the issue of personal salvation. This salvation was to be managed by the church with the administration of the sacraments and the distribution of grace, and it was all dependent on the development of special offices of the church empowered to administer God's grace in churchly actions....The problem was not that the gospel was no longer heard. The problem is that the gospel was and is larger, more cosmic, more transforming, more revolutionary in its scope than such an individualized and privatized reduction of it suggests.¹⁴

It is the calling of the higher councils of the church to help congregations see a larger, more comprehensive view of the gospel than what they are prone to see. Struggling as they inevitably must against local pressures to conform to societal mores and norms, congregations too easily reduce the cosmic and revolutionary claims of the gospel to their personal implications. Higher councils – especially the General Assembly – can remind the whole church that the good news is that God is at work transforming not merely individual lives, but societies and nations and the whole of creation. Higher councils have a theological responsibility to refresh our experience of the revelation, to hold before the whole church the grand dimensions of the Christian hope, to remind the whole church that “the Kingdom of God is near,” and to call the whole church to repentance and faith.¹⁵

“Middle governing bodies” are so named in the informal parlance of our polity because they are positioned at the intersection between the congregational life and the life of the whole people of God. This is especially true of the presbytery, which is responsible to nurture, guide and govern congregational witness through its ministries of mission planning, leadership development, and congregational care, and at the same time to contribute directly to the work of the whole church through its elected commissioners to the General Assembly. No other council in our system has direct relationships with both the particular witness of congregations (even of individual members) and the work and witness of the whole church. The presbytery can and must play the key role in translating the “more cosmic, more transforming, more revolutionary” gospel into local contexts. This is not a role the General Assembly itself can play, since it does not have anything approaching the direct relationship with congregations that are native to the presbytery.

This means that the efforts of the higher governing bodies, and especially that of the General Assembly, must be clearly focused on resourcing *presbyteries*, sustaining and nurturing their ministry to congregations. The General Assembly or its mission agencies must not succumb to the temptation to take the place of the presbytery, “eliminating the middle man” by leaping over the presbyteries in an effort to work directly with congregations. The Assembly and its agencies simply cannot know the missional contexts of 173 presbyteries - let alone 11,000 congregations – with sufficient clarity to provide effective support for congregational mission. The Assembly and its entities can, however, assist presbyteries in meeting the challenges of their unique role. For instance:

¹⁴ Guder, *Continuing Conversion*, pp.189-190.

¹⁵ The *Book of Order* gives authority to councils at all levels, including the session, to “frame symbols of faith, bear testimony against error in doctrine and immorality in life, resolve questions of doctrine and of discipline, give counsel and guidance, and decide issues properly brought before them...” (G-9.0102b). But it privileges the General Assembly in the writing or editing of confessional statements by requiring Assembly approval at both the beginning and end of the process, and through the Assembly's creation of a study committee. This privilege is, I would argue, entirely consistent with a missional view of the creative tension between congregational witness and the larger view of the gospel available to the larger church.

- The Assembly can and should develop instruments and expertise to assist presbyteries in the demographic and sociological trend assessment indispensable in mission planning for evangelism and new congregational development. At present, presbyteries devote considerable resources to purchasing this information from companies like Percept or Mission Initiative. Could this be accomplished through denominational-level contracts at a lower cost and in a manner more directly attuned to Presbyterian polity?
- Denominational agencies are already doing solid work in vocational development: the Church Leadership Connection and resources available for COMs and CPMs through the Vocations Office, and the Credo program offered through the Board of Pensions are examples of ways the national church supports the leadership development function of presbyteries. Could the Assembly and its agencies explore the creation of high-quality educational resources for elder and deacon training? For continuing education of congregational professionals?
- Currently, congregational transformation and conflict management resources are almost exclusively done either by amateurs who have received minimal training by presbyteries, or by highly-paid consultants outside the church. Could the Assembly develop its own Institute for Congregational Care and Development that provides training in and consultation for missional transformation and/or conflict management?

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What changes are implied in this description of interconciliar relationships? At the heart of the matter, General Assembly staff and entity leadership must come to see presbytery staff and leadership as both partners in ministry and *as the target audience for assembly programs and initiatives*. In addition to the ideas in the previous paragraph, such a change would manifest itself in simple ways: for example, notifying and seeking a presence from presbytery leadership whenever an Assembly level committee meets or hosts a major program within the bounds of a presbytery. Or it might mean seeking presbytery guidance, input, and assistance at the planning stages of Assembly evangelism initiatives or capital campaigns for mission funding (as opposed to waiting until “roll-out” to carry on presbytery consultations).

By the same token, presbytery staff and leadership must come to regard Assembly staff and leadership as partners in and key resources for their ministries. Presbyteries must do more to introduce Assembly leadership to congregations, and to build relationships of trust. Presbyteries must do a more effective job of interpreting the role and work of the Assembly and its agencies to congregations, creating a base of accurate information that can counterbalance the regular campaign of misinformation in parts of the para-church media. Presbyteries must continue to meet the obligations of *per capita* support and to encourage both designated and undesignated mission support wherever possible.

Presbyteries and the General Assembly alike need to begin thinking together about alternatives to the current operations of the biennial meetings of the Assembly. At present, too much business is handled in too short a period of time for the church to pretend that the process is sufficiently deliberative and discerning of the Spirit's guidance. The pace and volume of business, together with the obvious application of political pressure by various interest groups, are off-putting to commissioners and directly related to the degree of distrust many members of congregations and presbyteries harbor toward the Assembly. Perhaps one of the best things the conversations between Assembly and MGB staff could produce is a means to control the flow of Assembly business so that commissioners better understand what is before them and can more intelligibly communicate the Assembly's decisions once they return to their presbyteries and congregations. Even radical suggestions are worthy of consideration: could the work of current GA standing committees be

assigned to synods or clusters of presbyteries, which meet in advance of the General Assembly, so that these bodies could consider and recommend action on overtures and reports *before* the Assembly convenes? Could electronic communications be utilized more effectively in decision-making? Conversations of this nature are underway among GA and presbytery staff, and they should be encouraged to continue.

It remains unclear what declining funding will do to the ability of the General Assembly and its entities to be a viable force in ecclesiastical life. In a missional ecclesiology, however, the role of the higher governing body is indispensable in lifting the church's vision of the gospel and its possibilities. Whatever we can do to enhance the partnership between presbyteries and the General Assembly ultimately enhances our ability to be the Church together.

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APPENDIX: SUMMARY OF THE OPERATIONAL DESIGN OF THE PRESBYTERY OF ST. AUGUSTINE

The new manual for the Presbytery of St. Augustine describes its function in terms of three core ministries:

“Strengthening Missional Congregations

The presbytery encourages and works with congregations to become transformed, outwardly focused, and engaged in mission in their communities. It provides support and resources for congregations and ministers in crisis and transition.

“Congregations are the Church engaged in mission in their context. They are called upon to proclaim the Word compellingly and invitingly, so that people both within and beyond the church walls are called to see themselves as part of the story of God's grace. They are sacramental communities that form a bridge between the alienation and hunger of the world and the gracious community and generous meal of grace offered at font and table. They are communities of faith whose central task is to “make disciples of all nations, ... teaching them to observe” the way of Jesus Christ. Presbytery's role in this ministry is to strengthen and support the work of its congregations by offering regular counsel and guidance; opportunities for education, growth, and outreach; and support through periods of congregational crisis and pastoral transition. In so doing, the presbytery fulfills its mission of “strengthening the ministry of its congregations.

“Developing New Missional Communities

“The presbytery establishes new congregations, and encourages the development of Bible study fellowships, mission works, and other faith communities by instilling a vision for new witness, and by networking congregations and individuals who share a vision for such communities.

“New communities of witness – new churches, new mission works, new fellowships for Bible study and service – are all expressions of the impetus to proclaim the Word and nurture disciples. Presbytery's role in this ministry is in networking individuals and congregations together in this work, and in locating resources from the synod and General Assembly to support it.

“Forming Missional Leaders

“The presbytery teaches officers and members the skills needed to lead missional congregations in the 21st century church. It nurtures the sense of call and guides the educational development of persons called to ministry.

“Missional leaders are those ministers, elders, deacons, and other believers who are prepared to lead congregations into the future through challenging proclamation of the Word, faithful offering of sacramental community, and thoughtful nurture of the community of disciples. Presbytery’s role in this ministry is to oversee the development and education of ministers, offer educational opportunities for elders and deacons, and provide occasions for spiritual formation and growth that bring together people from multiple congregations as well as from outside the church. In so doing, the presbytery fulfills its historic role in preparing new ministers, as well as its theological calling to nurture the covenant community of disciples.”

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This redefinition of the presbytery’s function is characterized by several significant shifts in thinking. First, it understands that the principal function of the presbytery is not as an agent of mission, especially to the extent that such a mission would lead away from the mission of its congregations. Rather, the presbytery understands itself to exist, as its mission statement says, “to serve Jesus Christ by strengthening the ministry of its congregations, and by enabling us to do together what none could do alone.”

Second, it understands its committees, commissions, minister members (whether parish or non-parish based), and staff as resources for the three ministry areas. Committees are not the mission of the presbytery, they are resources for the mission.

Third, there is considerable flexibility in the structure. Rather than maintaining a panoply of committees (our previous structure had sixteen and a coordinating council), we are preserving only eight, six of which are the mandated structures required in G-9.0902a. The accomplishment of the ministry of the presbytery is entrusted to mission coordinators, under the supervision of the Presbytery Council, who are free and encouraged to form *ad hoc* networks of individuals and congregations to accomplish the strategic goals of each ministry.