

A White Paper for the MGB-GAMC Advisory Board
“What Presbyteries Do Best that the Church Needs Most”

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Preface – “What do Presbyteries do best,” may not be the first question we, as Presbyterian leaders, need to ask. Using an example from the business world, in the age of computers being the best manufacturer of slide rules may not be enough to keep a firm in business. In the same way, every town and city in the early 1900’s had as many blacksmith shops as there are gas stations today. Being the best in the horseshoe business in 1899 did not guarantee success or viability in the next century. As Presbyteries, Synods, GAMC, and even congregations, we may do some things very well, but it may not be what the world needs, or if we could be so presumptive, what God desires. In our emerging post-corporate and post-regulatory denomination, we may at one point have excelled in doing church as well as GM built cars, but it is a new world. A better first question may be one of purpose: “Why do Presbyteries or other church structures exist?”

What is the purpose of a Presbytery?

In a 21st century context the greater purpose of a Presbytery may best be understood from the perspective of the *misio dei*, or the mission of God. As disciples of the PCUSA variety, our primary purpose is not to maintain an institution. “Church”, in all its layers, meanings and dimensions including presbyteries, is not about us. However, our words, actions, and investments of time and energy often portray the very opposite - we make it about us. A starting point in recovering God’s intent and mission for the church, including presbyteries, is to remind ourselves of the correct reading of John 3:16: “For God so loved the **world**,” not “For God so loved the **church**.” Mission is the essence of what God has called the church to be and sent the church into the world to do; mission is our vocation),

In service to that greater vision and God’s mission, the essential purpose of a Presbytery can be understood as three-fold:

- to support and encourage the growth of healthy vital missional congregations, or **congregational care and transformation**;
- to insure leaders are equipped (disciple) for leadership in congregations, and to empower leaders for God’s mission in the world, or **leadership development**;
- to build understandings, networks and congregational partnerships for the purpose of missional engagement, witness, and cooperation within the geographical bounds of a Presbytery, as well as find means to encourage, support and demonstrate the larger and global witness of the church through the work of the Synod and General Assembly. or **missional engagement and cooperation**.

None of this is new, but in this post-regulatory post-modern era, that three-fold purpose reframes the 27 Presbytery responsibilities as prescribed in the Book of Order and is a restatement of what we read in:

- the book of Acts,
- Calvin’s Geneva experiment with the Consistory and the Venerable Company of Pastors,
- The minutes of the first Presbytery meetings (1706) where we hear the testimony of the early Presbyterian pioneers who believed that congregations could be stronger (congregational care), pastors more effective and faithful (leadership development), and

mission more strategic (missional engagement) in a Presbyterian rather than congregational form of government[1].

So... What is it Presbyteries do best that the church [PCUSA] needs the most?

Given the responsibilities the Book of Order assigns to presbyteries, the question of what a Presbytery does best in light of what the church (PCUSA) needs most is best framed around the ecclesiastical and functional reality that without faithful, functional, and vital Presbyteries we cannot be a denomination [2]. Our Reformed theological heritage, the way we Presbyterians understand scripture, and the Book of Order state that we cannot be a church unless congregations and clergy find ways to govern, support, and be accountable to each other in organic, connectional, strategic, and hopefully meaningful and geographically bounded sets called Presbyteries.

The Book of Order spells out 19 specific responsibilities of a congregation, 27 for a Presbytery, 5 for a synod which are primarily related to strengthening Presbyteries and 5 for General Assembly Mission Council. However, the glue, the connector, the keystone in the way we have self-organized as a church is the Presbytery. Presbyteries are in the middle. What Presbyteries do best (or need to do best) that the church needs most is:

- to guide, empower, and connect congregations, clergy and elders together so as to support and nurture the growth of healthy vital missional congregations,
- and to serve as an effective and appropriate connector between congregations and the mission and work of the larger church.

Summary - In our connectional, as opposed to vertically-integrated hierarchical, form of government, GA/GAMC, Synods, Presbyteries, and Sessions live together in an interdependent relationship, but the nature of that relationship is not always clear. The Book of Order delineates the responsibilities of each governing body, but how each governing body collaborates, relates and partners with the other governing bodies as we fulfill our individual responsibilities and common mission is not well-defined. The result has been that each part of the body has often focused on its own self-understandings and self-preservation, and has functioned independently of the others. We are a connectional church, but have not always connected well. It has been easy within the limits of time, money and energy to live in our own silo. Some might say we have each developed something of tunnel vision or maybe even presbyopia.

What the church (PCUSA) needs most is for congregations to be alive, vital, faithful, fruitful, reformed, missional and growing. That is the job of Presbyteries, but it is not one that can be done alone. The biblical vision of how we can be a connectional church together is best summed up by the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:16 "...the whole body (church), joined and knit together with each ligament which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and builds itself up in love." That is the ideal to which we strive. We need each other, and for the sake of God's mission to the world we need to find ways to connect, collaborate, and be the church together in meaningful ways.

Notes:

[1] This is from a 2006 unpublished research project by Graham Hart.

[2] Congregations in denominations that have a congregational form of government do exist as independent and unrelated churches, but that is not how Presbyterians theologically, historically, and pragmatically have lived out our common life together.