

These notes are not private but they are most meaningful to the participants of the “Next Steps” meeting at the Presbyterian Mission Center, Aug. 11-12, 2008. People (50) from all 11 presbyteries in Synod of the Sun attended this meeting designed to help presbyteries help congregations understand and interpret the work of the 2008 General Assembly (218th).

Notes from Discussion Groups

Numbered titles are the topics which participants wanted to discuss.

Notes below them are rough summaries of the comments.

1. Polity Matters

No report

2. Retention/Engagement

We have to find some ways of talking to one another, particularly with those who have different opinions. “One on one” works, but in a large and long conversation like General Assembly meetings, it gets cut off.

3. Alternative Decision Making

How to live within our covenant relationship. “Discernment/Robert’s Rule Hybrid” method of coming to consensus. It matters if decision is immediate or has local effect; trust is a big factor in making decisions. We don’t allow enough time in decision making. Framing/reframing the question is important. Allow as many voices as possible to be heard. Decision may not be as important as the process that allows it, or as the relationships that were built up in that process. Strong leadership important in moderating the process, even if the group is the one doing the work.

4. Not Politics as Usual

Local church and presbytery/synod meetings have lots of politics; why wouldn’t GA? What if second day of GA was a day of discernment? No open or closed meetings; a day to listen. At the end of the day, do a “home group” to discuss what was heard. Relationships also important to keep us from fighting so much.

5. Examinations

COM as the gatekeeper for the presbytery. In one presbytery, COM vets PIFs before they go to PNCs. Some presbyteries have specific examinations committees. Holistic examinations – personal relationship with Jesus, physical life, financial life, emotional life, etc. We need to improve on examining pastors as whole persons, and also for “fit” with the presbytery and the local church. Examinations DO matter!

6. Separation without Divorce

“Separation without divorce” already exists. Question: what are some underpinnings of that? Relationships. How do we re-engage those who are already separate? Pastor and elder collegiality in smaller group settings; pastor and elder training. Next step: smaller presbyteries which would by itself create smaller group collegiality? Would afford accountability at the outset as well as greater voice within the denomination. Assigned clusters or voluntary groups can be more hit-or-miss. At the center of this is the calling of Christ: be in relationship BEFORE being in debate.

7. Developing Trust Within the Denomination

Learning to share the good news of what we’re doing, not just the bad. Transparency and listening to each other are important – setting aside our own agendas.

Relationships are important, also between congregations and presbytery, and at GA level. Breaches in those relationships are difficult. Trust must be earned – *trustworthy*. A problem is people who lose their willingness to be accountable – must be challenged. Trust is really at the bottom of everything we do that’s important. Causes us to be engaged and pay attention. Question: does stating our own positions build walls, or build trust? Often, not saying where we are causes others to believe we have hidden agendas. Avoiding controversy isn’t always good. Generational issues can also impact; are there ways that older generations can build trust in younger generations? How to help younger generations learn to sort through the rafts of information.

Communication is vital, as is face-to-face contact, within a congregation or presbytery or denomination. Being trustful is counter-cultural, as opposed to being suspicious. Smaller churches can host council meetings or gather to read minutes.

8. Potential Overtures

Within own Synod, share various overtures that presbyteries are submitting, so we can be supportive of each other. Whatever happens with “B,” there will be new overtures. Defining churchwide standards for fitness of office; “property in trust” clause – any changes there? Possibly restricting per capita or general mission funding.

9. Out of the Box Thinking

Need to be ways to depoliticize the church at this time, and get the focus back on what we believe to be the real issues of the church: making disciples for Christ, and our failure to do that. Could a convocation or conference be called of a small group of pastors and lay leaders who have a track record of doing a great job of making disciples and engaging their communities? Could they recommend ways that changes could be made across the denomination? Go to the people who’ve shown they have expertise in this area, and ask them to find ways to share those changes with others. Why not “overture storm?” Give presbyteries a chance to name that elephant in the room, and bring to GA those issues they see not being addressed at this time. Point: they not be assigned in traditional committee structures, but to small groups for report-out to GA. (Overtures currently our only method to change the conversation) Bottom line: renewing a sense of call to discipleship, not to institutional survival.

Commonalities:

Relationships

trust

communications

discipleship

focus back on pursuing Christ’s mission – less arguing and protecting of turf; not so much lost as put on back shelf (BOO ch 3)

talking and *listening*

discernment and slowing down; COURAGE

What is NOT being talked about:

What does it mean to be in relationship today? How do we set boundaries? Issues must center around a sense of humility: a willingness to listen for Christ in what others say. This willingness is lost when we come not to listen but to convince.

New systems – we're not willing so far to talk about politics.

What are the 30-yr-olds looking for? Losing the younger generation.... Are we open to shaping the church for a generation of 30- and 40-yr olds?

Why questions are suppressed at presbytery and session meetings

Questions raised:

tension between building trust and “posturing” when we talk about issues – exists because of who we are?

How do we define “Christ’s mission?”

How can we talk about difficult issues without beating up the others? Diversity is a value, but we also must listen. Calvin: the value of an educated citizenry. Shirley Guthrie: *Diversity in Faith, Unity in Christ*.

How do we move forward so that we're not back here two years from now for “Groundhog Day?” How different are we racially, culturally, theologically than we were 2 years ago?

At what point do we build a relationship on “not revealing?” The one who steps forward now is very vulnerable, but it will hurt us in the long run.

What is the unique contribution of this synod and its presbyteries?

How do we get in the way of where God is calling us, and how can we stop doing so?

Congregational elephant: shall we continue to exist?

Does it matter whether we will survive? Denominational elephant is relevance.

Why can we not communicate a single unifying vision of the things that are important to us? (No clear and consistent statements come forth for fear of offending)

New slogan:

“The elephant is relevant?” “The relevance is in the room?” Frustrative!

Ideas for next time:

room setup was like pews. Why do we not set the room up for more conversational style? Groups of 8, or in a circle, or whatever?

Conversation went on a bit too long

Good to end on a positive note – YAD video

More time – we just got “relevant” today

Think about the invitation list – who gets to be here?

Think about how to move this group from “reactive” (to previous GA) to “active” – not “next steps” but “new steps”