

# GOVERNANCE IN A TIME OF FERMENT

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Many Presbyterians are considering the wisdom and desirability of **reforming the governance** of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to reflect the increasing inability of the denomination to sustain the programmatic and ecclesiastical structures of regional synods and presbyteries established in the 1970's and reaffirmed in 1983 with the reuniting of the PCUS and the UPCUSA.

The adoption of a **leaner Form of Government** (nFOG) is currently before the church. Its adoption would be of assistance in this endeavor in that it would establish a less directive Constitutional framework for allowing each presbytery to shape its structures and operational manuals to function in whatever way most effectively reflects the realities of its:

- geography,
- size,
- missional priorities,
- levels of diversity,
- staffing, and
- financial realities.

The General Assembly has also established a **Commission** authorized to approve recommendations arising from presbyteries or synods for the modification of boundaries in the manner provided for in the Constitution.

If the new Form of Government becomes operational, each presbytery and synod will be obligated to consider the revision of its organizational life. Some presbyteries and synods will continue with little change: their structures work for them and the manual language currently in the Form of Government will be sustained in their operational manuals. Others, perhaps most, will eliminate or combine committees and modify the manner in which ecclesiastical functions are fulfilled.

**The above dynamics are evolutionary in nature and should be encouraged to emerge from the presbyteries.** Under no circumstances should the denomination adopt a hypothetical, generic fix to the perceived difficulties in governance. The denomination **cannot** sustain another round of unwanted universal chaos in our structures and operational styles.

**There are two other dynamics prevalent within the denomination that complicate the evolutionary approach reflected above. Both could have profound effects on the very identity of the Presbyterian Church, its governance and the course of our attempts to address theological and cultural differences and disagreements.**

1. Some Presbyterians long for a return to smaller, ecclesiastically focused entities with little to no staff and programmatic initiatives arising solely out of the congregations.

Some even envision a return to state based missional synods. These instincts could lead to substantive changes in the number of presbyteries and synods, although it is more likely that synods, as a governance entity, would be reduced to the minimal functions defined in the nFOG ( G-3.0404 Reduced Function) or disappear altogether<sup>1</sup>, being replaced by presbytery clusters for missional cooperation.

Our historic and Foundational principles of governance could be sustained if such presbyteries were

- the natural evolution of our current realities and the growing inability to sustain programmatic, regional entities;
- retained a geographical coherence for both congregations and the minister members residing in their bounds; and,
- encompassed the current diversity of congregations – size, ethnicity, staffing, and theological orientation within that geography.

If they were created to increase the number of homogeneous entities based on theology or church dividing issues, they would harm our Reformed witness in society and further polarize the denomination.

1. A second and more disturbing trend is that those with differing positions on the theology and mission of the denomination have expressed a desire for a polity that would allow them to organize themselves into affinity groups for governance<sup>2</sup>. Most of these proposals for affinity presbyteries and synods contain provisions whereby they would be free to disavow or exempt themselves from *Constitutional* provisions, judicial processes and denominational positions with which they disagree. Yet they also seek the right to vote on those provisions and positions in the more inclusive governing bodies and to use the judicial system to seek to impose their positions on others.

With the exception of Dakota Presbytery<sup>3</sup>, nongeographic language presbyteries are rare and so far have been limited to Koreans. The General Assembly has rejected the creation of a nongeographic Korean synod.

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<sup>1</sup> There are a few synodical responsibilities that are inappropriate for the General Assembly to assume and therefore if synods were eliminated, should to be lodged in a handful of new regional entities e.g. judicial functions on appeal from the presbyteries or against the presbyteries, the organization and dissolution of presbyteries, administrative review of the work of presbyteries, and presbytery oversight in times of conflict.

<sup>2</sup> Our polity in G-12.0102k does allow for synods to create non-geographic presbyteries “in order to meet the mission needs (G-11.0103a; G-12.0102a) of identified racial ethnic or immigrant congregations; subject to the approval of the General Assembly” and in the same manner as the creation of any other presbytery. There is also a provision in the current FOG, but not the nFOG, for individual congregations in synods without such presbyteries to join the non-geographical presbytery of another synod. However, it is also clearly stated that: **“such presbyteries should be formed only on the basis of language, and there should be a sunset clause (end date) added at the formation of each nongeographic presbytery.”** The wisdom of the sunset clause is confirmed by the continuing rejection of the mandatory ordination of women as deacons, elders and ministers in a significant number of Korean congregations formed under this provision and their inordinate use of the denominations judicial processes to address internal dissent.

<sup>3</sup> Dakota Presbytery is the oldest presbytery west of the Mississippi and is ethnically based. It is also the presbytery of a sovereign nation within the bounds of the United States. That makes it unique within our polity.

**Both components of these proposals are absurd** – so unreasonable as to be ridiculous. Simply stated, such proposals move beyond the Foundational Principles of Presbyterian governance – expressed in a polity which has ample room for dissent within the bounds of mutual forbearance without the creation of church dividing parallel governance entities. Furthermore the very act of asking for nongeographical affinity presbyteries or synods is in effect to request that the denomination sanction a **scruple** to our vows as members of the church<sup>4</sup> or as officers<sup>5</sup>. This is not possible.

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<sup>4</sup> G-5.0200, W-4.2003 “declaring their intention to participate in the mission and governance of the church.”

<sup>5</sup> W-4.0403e, g, i(2 & 3) “Will you be governed by our church’s polity, and will you abide by its discipline? Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God’s Word and Spirit? ... Do you promise to further the peace purity and unity of the church? ... (for elders) Will you share in government and discipline, serving in governing bodies of the church...? (for ministers) Will you be active in government and discipline, serving in the governing bodies of the church ...?”