

Proposal for a Task Force on the Future of Presbyterian Ministry in the Synod of Mid-America

Purpose & Composition

The proposed Task Force on the Future of Presbyterian Ministry in the Synod of Mid-America will be a cooperative task force of the Synod of Mid-America (SoMA) and its member presbyteries to assess the current state of Presbyterian Ministry in the region; to identify future social, demographic, and economic trends that may affect the sustainability and effectiveness of that ministry; and to make recommendations for the purpose of enabling the SoMA and its presbyteries to strengthen their support of the “witness of congregations, to the end that the church throughout [the] region becomes a community of faith, hope, love, and witness” (*Book of Order, G-3.0401*).

The work of the Task Force shall primarily be focused on two areas of inquiry:

- *Organizational Sustainability*: Are the current presbytery structures sufficient to effectively support the witness of congregations?
- *Strength of Relationships*: Do current presbytery structures sufficiently enable the building and sustaining of relationship between congregations and their members?

The Task Force may elect to pursue other areas of inquiry if it becomes clear (through its research) that additional insight and/or recommendations would strengthen the support of the witness of congregations.

Any recommendations produced by the Task Force will not be considered binding in and of themselves, but will be offered to the SoMA and its member presbyteries for consideration in the spirit of edification, a desire for strengthening, and for support.

In keeping with the cooperative nature of the work, the Task Force will be composed of 12 members: Six members will serve as representatives of the six SoMA presbyteries, equally distributed, chosen from among their members (and not currently serving as a Synod Commissioner). One SoMA Commissioner from each presbytery will also be chosen to serve (and from among whom the Moderator will be chosen).

Background & Rationale

In the Fall of 2014, Synod Executive/Clerk Landon Whitsitt invited the staff and elected leaders of the Presbyteries of Northern and Southern Kansas to participate in a conversation about the future of ministry in Kansas. In his invitation, he wrote:

“You are more aware than most that the nature of church life is changing in the Midwest. Your Councils have particular concern for Kansas, and I know from your own witness that ministry has significantly changed for you in the last decade and shows no sign of stopping. To be sure, not all of this change is unwelcome, but the horizon suggests that how you do ministry in the future will need to be attended to.”

Nine leaders gathered in McPherson, KS in December of that year. Topics discussed were wide ranging, from demographics and worldview to presbytery organization, funding, and mission priorities. Two common themes were repeatedly raised during the first meeting: **organizational sustainability** and the **lack of relationships**.

“What we’re doing is unsustainable.”

“Working together in an unsustainable way is not a solution either.”

“How do we build on what good we are doing while accepting that none of this will look the same in 5-10 years.”

“Let’s not look at this as a problem, but as a question of ‘Where is God calling us to be?’” “I want to have these conversations before we’re forced to have them through crisis.” “How do we help our congregations develop significant relationships with one another?” “‘Relationship’ has come up repeatedly as we’ve gone around the table.”

“The future of the presbytery is in getting to a place where we don’t have to drive 4 hours in order to do the work our relationships require.”

At the conclusion of the conversation, all agreed to meet again within six months. During a May 2015 meeting, the leaders gathered to discuss the book *The Three Laws of Performance* as a way of learning how to think and talk of a more hopeful future. A preliminary conversation was held with each presbytery’s Council exploring the convening a more formal meeting with broader representation from each presbytery.

Due to significant staff turnover in 4 of the 6 SoMA presbyteries (and the synod staff’s work to facilitate replacements), and concluding the work given the synods by the General

Assembly regarding possible reconfiguration, the broader meeting was never convened. When raised again in the context of a meeting of presbytery executive staff, the suggestion was made that a discernment process regarding the future of ministry in our region should include **all** our presbyteries.

The SoMA and its member presbyteries find themselves at a unique moment in time. Each presbytery is engaged in (in some form or another) discernment work concerning their future role serving the districts they presently cover. 4 of 6 presbyteries currently employ a transitional leader tasked with assisting them in this work. Three presbyteries are earnestly contending with a decline in per capita and mission giving. One presbytery has recently lost 1/3 of its membership.

The conversation that is needed, however, is not simply a conversation about shared services, boundaries, or staffing models. The conversation needed goes to the heart of who we are as Presbyterians:

- What is congregational witness? (G-3.0201)
- What is mission and ministry? (G-1.0101, G-2.0101)
- How does a presbytery assist and support the witness of congregations? (G-3.0301)
- In what ways should a synod support the ministry and mission of presbyteries? (G- 3.0401)

There has been no intentional review or discussion of the organizational structure and mission focus of the SoMA's member presbyteries since 1973, when the three predecessor synods of the PCUS and UPCUSA joined together in union. Much has changed in the past 44 years.

While there are presbyteries that can and will immediately benefit from this work, there is, thankfully, no current, region-wide acute crisis requiring it. However, the quotes above are not unusual. They are regular refrains synod staff hears as they work in and with presbyteries. Presbyterians in the SoMA desire stronger relationships between their congregations, as well as presbytery organizational structures that better support them in their work together.

Thus, this proposal is presented with the ultimate goal of strengthening the SoMA mid- councils' ability to support congregations as they "witness to the sovereign activity of God in the world" so that, together, our region "is and becomes a community of faith, hope, love, and witness" [G-3.0201].

Name & Functioning

The term “task force” has been chosen to reflect the work at hand: *To charge a group of church members to work on a task*. Other naming options are available in Presbyterian constitutional language, but each carry inherent and explicit rights and responsibilities not needed or desirable to fulfill the essence of this proposal or work.

To title the group a “committee” implies formal, on-going work, the scope of which is far reaching (eg. Finance, Personnel, etc.). Committees are also typically comprised of members of a given body. A “joint committee” between the SoMA and each presbytery would, however, be possible.

Another option would be: “commission.” Constitutionally, a commission holds the power of the body that formed it. That power can be universal or circumscribed, depending on the situation. However, since the purpose of the proposal is to form a group to explore and recommend options, not execute changes, forming the body as a commission would endow more authority than is required to accomplish the task.

It is expected that the Task Force not function as an isolated entity. Following from an understanding of the foundations of Presbyterian polity, we do not assume the Task Force (both as a whole, and as individual members) will begin its work in possession of enough pertinent knowledge and information. The nature of its task will be to work closely with the SoMA and its member presbyteries to gather data, which will suggest and reveal trends.

At the most basic level, the role of the Task Force will be to gather information, aggregate it, and recommend actions based on an analysis of said information. The Task Force should be prepared to be transparent in its work, providing reports of its progress to all seven councils.