

## The NCAA and the PCUSA

As a big sports fan, I have been watching how the NCAA is working to maintain unity in the ever changing landscape of Division I athletics. It has made me wonder if the PCUSA should discuss something similar. Consider the following changes that will be made this coming fall in college sports:

The University of Nebraska is leaving the Big 12 conference for the Big 10 conference. (The Big 10 conference will now have 12 teams, but that's a different story).

The University of Colorado is leaving the Big 12 for the Pac 10 (which will become the Pac 12).

The University of Utah is leaving the Mountain West conference for the Pac 10 (now the Pac 12).

Brigham Young University is leaving the Mountain West conference to become independent (like Notre Dame).

Texas Christian University is leaving the Mountain West for Big East Conference (it doesn't matter that TCU is not actually in the east).

Boise State, Fresno State, and Nevada are all leaving the Western Athletic Conference for the Mountain West.

Because the Big 10 will now have 12 teams, it will split its teams into two divisions (Legends and Leaders), but it will remain one conference.

This month is one of my favorite months of the year: March Madness! There are 32 different conferences that make up Division I NCAA athletics. The winners of the 32 conferences come together with 36 at large teams to form the 68 team field. 32 different conferences make up 1 NCAA. The Big 10 doesn't try to change the rules that the Southeast Conference plays by, and the Atlantic Coast Conference doesn't try to change the rules that the PAC 10 plays by, but they all play under the umbrella of the same NCAA, and abide by its decisions. Sometimes, universities change the conferences they play in. They don't leave the NCAA, but sometimes they leave their conference. This is a way to maintain unity and diversity.

Would this type of approach help in the PCUSA? Should we make it easier for churches to move from the Big 10 to the Big 12(changing presbyteries)? Should we make it easier for presbyteries to move from the ACC to the SEC (changing synods)? Since you only need 10 churches to have a presbytery, should we make it easier for churches to create new presbyteries, and for presbyteries to create new synods?

Some of our conversations make it sound like we believe unity happens organizationally from the top down. I disagree. I think unity happens from the bottom up. The most important place to be unified is within a congregation. That is where it all begins. Then, we need to work on developing unity within our presbyteries. If we don't have unity within our presbyteries, I doubt we will ever have unity within our denomination at a national level. Tip O'Neill used to say that all politics is local. I think he was right. What if unity is local, as well? What if a presbytery has been working to achieve unity

for the last 30 years, and has not been unsuccessful? Would it make sense to experiment with some churches transferring out of the presbytery and other churches transferring in, to achieve a greater unity at the presbytery level? If after 10 years, we were able to achieve greater unity within our presbyteries, could we then start to work on greater unity at the national level?

We already have 16 synods and 173 presbyteries. Just as each congregation has its own unique identity, each presbytery has its own unique identity. What happens when a congregation realizes its identity does not match up well with the presbytery it is in? What happens if it discovers that its DNA actually matches up a lot better with the DNA of a different presbytery? Can we allow our churches to change conferences within the denomination like they do in college athletics? Can we allow new presbyteries, new synods, new fellowships, and new networks to be created to advance the Kingdom of God? In our church history, we have allowed for different orders within a denomination (Dominicans, Franciscans, Jesuits). Is it time for the PCUSA to explore something similar?

The DNA of the Presbytery of San Diego is made up of spiritual/theological, missional, and relational strands. If there are other congregations, presbyteries, and fellowships that have a similar DNA, should we be encouraging new relationships if they will advance the Kingdom of God? Three years ago, our presbytery voted to affiliate with the Presbyterian Global Fellowship (PGF). We realized that we had a similar DNA, were working for overlapping purposes, and that it made sense to formalize a relationship. The ethos of Presbyterianism is to continue to develop and grow these kinds of connections in the service of the Savior Jesus Christ and for the glory of God.

We know that realignments and restructurings are only partial solutions to the issues we are facing. They tend to deal mostly with technical, surface, and presenting issues, rather than the deeper, more fundamental, adaptive challenges we must face. They usually don't address the elephants in the room and they generally don't bring about culture change. But, identity issues are key adaptive issues we need to work on. And, if greater denominational unity follows greater presbytery unity, what changes do we need to make to help that happen? We know that "form follows function." Even the Form of Government in our Book of Order says, "Mission determines the form of structure and administration. All structures should enable the church to give effective witness to the Lordship of Christ in the contemporary world... All structures shall be open to the possibility of change." (G-9.0402a and c)

We know that Presbyterians are connectional people. We know that ministry is always about the relationships. When we discover that new relationships have been formed, and that people are already doing mission together with other people, the structural changes will follow where the relational changes have already happened. That is not a bad thing. That can be a very good thing. And if the new relationships have come from the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst, do we want to stand in their way?

The NCAA has learned that allowing schools to transfer to different conferences, and allowing conferences to divide into different divisions, can actually make some sports stronger. Would the same be true for the PCUSA?