

Synod Conversation
May 25, 2011

On May 25, 2011, the following people gathered at the offices of the Presbytery of the Pacific for a conversation:

Synod of Southern California and Hawaii – Doska Ross (exec/clerk), Fried Wilson (assistant)
Presbytery of San Gabriel – Ruth Santana-Grace (EP) (by phone), Bob Wendel (stated clerk)
Presbytery of Santa Barbara – Jan Armstrong (EP), Michelle Holmes (stated clerk)
Presbytery of San Diego – Clark Cowden (EP), Linda Therien (stated clerk)
Presbytery of Pacific – Linda Culbertson (EP), Wendy Tajima (stated clerk)
Rev. Dan Chun and Executive Director Ron Mathieu – First Pres Honolulu – requesting transfer from Presbytery of Pacific to Presbytery of San Diego
Rev. Greg Hughes – Malibu Pres – requesting transfer from Presbytery of Pacific to Presbytery of Santa Barbara
Rev. Jim Miller – Glenkirk Pres – requesting transfer from Presbytery of San Gabriel to Presbytery of San Diego (by phone)
Rev. Tod Bolsinger – moderator, Middle Governing Body Commission
Rev. Gradye Parsons (by phone) – Stated Clerk of the General Assembly

The conversation began with each church sharing why they wanted to transfer and presbyteries sharing conversations they had had about this.

The three congregations all expressed a desire to stay in a covenantal relationship, and not pull out of the PC(USA), but believing that a different presbytery would be a better “fit” for their church.

Many people expressed a need for change in our system and a desire to “think out of the box.” Tod Bolsinger commented that the Middle Governing Body Commission is looking for new models and possibilities to encourage.

Gradye Parsons shared that currently, non-geographic presbyteries are only allowed for racial ethnic needs. He said that the Honolulu church situation is unique and that they could make a logical case to be a part of any presbytery along the west coast. He said that Malibu and Honolulu could likely transfer presbyteries under the current geographic rules, but that the other church requests would require some constitutional changes.

Gradye said that our conversation about what actually constitutes a presbytery is a valid question. He is not opposed to non-geographic presbyteries if they are based on missional and not ideological reasons.

Jim Miller said that our non-geographic categories are archaic and that some more brainstorming and creativity are needed.

Greg Hughes commented that our parishioners are not bound geographically – they drive by many churches before arriving at our building.

Gradye Parsons said he is not here to stop creativity. But what binds us together is an open question, and it is important to respect the integrity and beliefs of people

Ruth Santana-Grace said that we are at a place in Southern California where we are called to be creative in a way we had not imagined. We have an opportunity here, and we could possibly help the whole denomination re-think some of these key issues.

Tod Bolsinger suggested that since Glenkirk cannot transfer to San Diego under the current geographic polity, could we let them become a corresponding member for a year and see how it goes? They could be given voice but not vote at San Diego presbytery meetings and begin building relationships. We could experiment with this for a year, keep checking in, see what works, what doesn't work, etc. Will this help us learn to function in a new way?

Gradye Parsons said there is no reason why you could not do this, as long as everybody is above board about it. He said that congregations need to be in covenantal communities, and we could organize those for reasons other than geography. He said that the missional conversation spans theology, and that we want to live into a new future to explore together.

Gradye also shared a story from reunion in the south, where an African-American church and a white church in the same city, ended up in different presbyteries because of historical and relational reasons, so we do have some cases of churches in the same location that were in different presbyteries. He said that it would be possible for Honolulu First to transfer to the Presbytery of San Diego without all of the churches in Hawaii transferring with them.

Linda Culbertson said that we need to cultivate multiple models and creative engagement. We need to experiment, fail, and see what bubbles up.

Ron Mathieu talked about something called a "reinvention laboratory" which got started under Al Gore. As a military base commander, he and his base were allowed to take on new initiatives and try some new experiments. He asked if our synod could begin to see itself as a reinvention laboratory? There seemed to be a lot of interest around the table in our synod becoming a reinvention laboratory.

Tod Bolsinger said that everybody he has talked to across the denomination wants change. He said everybody is wanting a less regulatory structure. But, our natural default is more regulation. We tend to think that the more rules there are, the better. There is a growing consensus to develop a less regulatory system. The question is how do we get there?

Linda Culbertson shared Alan Roxburgh's image of the Lion's Gate Bridge in Vancouver. They had to completely re-build the bridge without ever closing it down. Nobody knew how to do it and they couldn't explain how they would do it ahead of time. They had to simply get into it and figure it out as they went along. There were no experts, but they learned to do it as they went, and it actually worked.

Dan Chun shared how Max dePree has talked about how organizations are like symphonies that need to become like jazz ensembles. We are in a time where we need to learn to improvise.

The group agreed we need to lower the fear, raise the trust, and increase the creativity.

The tone of the conversation was very positive and collegial.

Clark Cowden

05/26/11