The Evolving Role of Presbytery after Christendom

Dr. David Dawson, Executive Presbyter, Shenango Presbytery, PA

Presbyteries could have an important role in nurturing missional church behavior. The focused use of funding and staff time for leadership training can be helpful in facilitating significant transformational change in congregations. In order to consider this latent potential we need to trace the historical development of presbyteries in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and its antecedents.

In his commentary on Jesus' discourse on "old and new" (Luke 5:36 – 39), N. T. Wright observes:
> Novelty is deeply threatening, especially when people have built their lives around the old way…don't expect the people who have given their lives to the old movements to be happy about switching allegiance. They are likely to stay with what they know.[1]

What is "old" and what is "new" and what of each should we embrace? All of us have known in our lifetimes a particular paradigm for presbyteries. For us it is the "old comfortable shoe." But, that model has not always been normative.

Robert Wood Lynn (former vice president for religion at the Lilly Endowment), when asked why everyone in mission funding clung so tenaciously to undesignated giving as normative, replied, "We should not be surprised. All of those in church leadership today have known only the unified system."[2] To what do we cling as normative in our understandings of the role of presbyteries?

I purpose in this paper to pursue the question of why we are so tightly bound to the Christendom[3] model of presbytery that has been the dying norm during our lifetime. Even though Christendom held sway in the first two centuries of American Presbyterianism, the role of presbyteries has not always been as it was during the second half of the twentieth century. What can we learn from past models without pretending that we can "return to the glory days." The issue is not "back to the past" but "down to basic principles." This paper is a brief history of how presbyteries developed. This will invite us into the emerging possibilities of the evolving role of presbyteries after Christendom. Presbyteries have not always been as they are today. Most of our history allowed for much greater autonomy in presbyteries and congregations. Can the future of the PC(USA) allow for this if we are still to be authentically "presbyterian" in our polity?

How it Began

Francis Makemie was among those who formed the first presbytery in Philadelphia in the Spring of 1706. They described their purpose as,
> …to meet yearly, and oftener, if necessary, to consult the most proper measures, for advancing religion, and propagating Christianity in our Various Stations, and to mention Such a Correspondence as may conduce to the improvement of our Ministerial ability by prescribing Texts to be preached on by two of our number every meeting, which performance is Subjected to the censure of our Brethren.[4]

According to these first principles, presbytery exist to meet for the purpose of advancing the cause of local congregations through accountability and teaching that would improvement the ministers' preaching.

When the Presbytery of Philadelphia met the next year (1707), three overtures were approved in which pastors were admonished to:
1. read and comment on a chapter of the Bible every Lord's day
2. encourage the formation of private Christian societies for doing good

3. supply "neighboring desolate places where a minister is wanting and opportunity of doing good offers"[5]

For the next nine years (a synod was formed by three presbyteries in 1716) the Presbytery met annually for three to five days. The agenda consisted of worship, acting on ecclesiastical matters, reviewing and approving calls, examining and ordaining candidates, making preaching assignments in response to requests from frontier areas, assigning pastors to visit remote areas to preach and administer the sacraments, dealing with tensions and disagreements between people and pastors, and approving correspondence.[6] Already the role of presbytery was expanding.

As Wayne Allen reminds us, "It is important to remember that each of the more inclusive governing bodies is created by those already involved in ministry and mission. Some larger group or authority does not impose the structure from above."[7] (The General Assembly was formed in 1789.)[8]

The most significant exposé of American Presbyterianism to date has been provided by the massive *Presbyterian Presence Series* edited c. 1990 by Milton J. Coulter, John M. Mulder and Louis B. Weeks. I will use the framework outlined there for much of what follows.

In *The Organizational Revolution* volume of that series, Craig Dykstra and James Hudnut-Beumler propose three basic developments in organizational culture in most Protestant denominations. There was significant overlap (see footnote 10).
1. constitutional confederacy (late 18th to late 19th centuries)
2. corporation - bureaucracies (late 19th to mid 20th centuries)
3. regulatory agencies (from the mid 1960's)[9]

Constitutional Confederacy

The Constitutional presbytery's main tasks were ecclesiastical jurisdiction, governance, and ordering of ministry.
> Its only staff was an elected stated clerk, often the pastor of a small church who received supplementary compensation from the presbytery…In the PCUSA and UPCUSA, the vast majority of presbyteries in the church continued to operate on this model until reorganization of the national boards in 1972 – 1973.[10]

Throughout most of the 18th century and the opening of the frontier, this settled presbytery system transplanted from Europe served the church well as it moved west of the Appalachians. After American Independence the frontier movement resumed its westward march and this created problems for the Christendom polity of Presbyterians. Maintenance of sound doctrine through an educated clergy was fine, except that the Methodist and Baptist were less concerned with educated clergy and therefore much better equipped to respond rapidly to the needs of the frontiers.

In addition there was the relationship of Presbyterians with the Congregationalists.
> The Old School-New School schism of 1837 involved questions about whether evangelization of the West should be done by Presbyterians alone or in concert with the Congregationalists, [who asserted much less theological control] and whether it should be carried out by church judicatories [presbyteries], church boards [sessions], or independent lay boards [voluntary societies].[11]

The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission (ABCFM - 1810) and the American Home Missionary Society (AHMS - 1816) were jointly founded by Presbyterian and Congregational individuals, not the denominations. This led to an important debate (still with us today) involving the role of presbyteries.

The Hodge-Thornwell Story[12]

Prior to the 1830's the Presbyterian Church did not have mission boards. The ABCFM and the AHMS were the common vehicles used by individuals and congregations to support mission beyond their immediate communities. At the urging of John Holt Rice and Elisha P. Swift, the PCUSA determined that the Presbyterian Church is itself a missionary society.[13] This led the PCUSA to form the Board of Foreign Missions (1837) and a variety of domestic mission boards. There ensued the eventual abandonment (by the denomination, but never by individuals and congregations) of the voluntary societies like the ABCFM and the AHMS. Since the mid-19th century the Presbyterian Church has always had mission boards.

Not everyone agreed that church boards were to be preferred over voluntary societies as the appropriate vehicle for mission. It was an issue in the New School/Old School split (1837) and was debated until the Civil War. The principle figures in one part of this debate were James Henley Thornwell and Charles Hodge.

Thornwell argued that church boards were no better than voluntary societies. Neither was acceptable because the New Testament did not overtly provide for boards. He argued that anything not explicitly commanded in the Bible should not be done. Mission was to be accomplished by sessions leading their congregations. He believed that the end of boards in favor of smaller executive committees in presbyteries, synods and the General Assembly was the logical conclusion of the 1837 General Assembly action declaring the church to be itself a missionary society. He found boards to be subversive of Presbyterian polity because domestic mission boards (rather than presbyteries) would appoint missionaries who then would become, as pastors of these new congregations that resulted from mission endeavors, members of presbyteries.

Hodge defended the boards on theological and pragmatic grounds. He labeled Thornwell's position as "hyper-hyper-hyper High Church Presbyterianism." Presbyterian polity was not structurally restricted only to what was *explicitly* provided for in the Bible. Christian liberty allows for the use of means appropriate to the situation. Furthermore, he contended that the presbytery could not handle the logistics necessary for mission, especially foreign mission.

Essentially, in the words of Ernest Trice Thompson, Hodge's position was, "You may do all that the Scriptures do not forbid." Whereas, Thornwell argued, "You can do only what the Scripture commands."[14]

Why is the Thornwell-Hodge story important to the development of presbyteries? The answer is found precisely in the question, "Who starts churches?" Hodge would argue that boards do this in cooperation with presbyteries which charter them and approve pastors.[15] Thornwell would argue that church sessions start churches and presbyteries charter them and approve pastors.[16] The PCUSA sided with Hodge and the PCUS followed Thornwell in its early years, but eventually embraced Hodge's position.

It might seem that Hodge won the debate in the Presbyterian Church, but today we are revisiting the issue in another form. Congregations are "doing mission" on their own terms. If they like work done by the denominational structures, they support it. If not, they give elsewhere.[17] The debate continues. This dramatically affects the role of presbyteries today and it is compounded where there is a wide theological diversity in a presbytery.

The American presbytery: The First Two Centuries

For more than two thirds of the history of institutional Presbyterianism in the United States, the description of the first presbytery (ecclesiastical jurisdiction, governance, and ordering of ministry) was normative. Ironically it may be to this radical paradigm that many presbyteries are returning today. Financial stresses have led to dramatic cuts in staff and program at the presbytery level in recent years. Virtually no presbytery has the staff and program that were common at the beginning of the 21st century. More streamlined meetings with more narrowly defined agendas are closer to the first two centuries than to the previous fifty years.

A covenantal and relational definition of Presbyterianism is more likely to be found at the presbytery level than at the synod or General Assembly. Conversations about the core values in our polity even opine for the intimacy and simplicity of much smaller presbyteries. As late as 1930 there were almost 300 presbyteries in the PCUSA alone compared to 173 in the PC(USA) today. Travel was slower in those days, but the function of a presbytery was much different than any that we have known in our lifetime.

Some presbyteries today distinguish between ecclesiastical committees and program committees. The former are required by the *Book of Order* because they address the basic functions of governance in a presbyterian polity. These ecclesiastical committees most closely represent the presbytery of the first two centuries of American Presbyterianism. So what happened to change all of that?

There were a variety of factors that emerged following the Civil War. Of particular significance was the modern corporation in the business world. Enterprising businessmen of this era developed huge holdings designed for efficiency and maximum profits. The church has always, often slowly and reluctantly, emulated successful business ventures. The turn of the twentieth century was a period of confidence and expansion inclined toward consolidation and efficiency. There were great needs and opportunities to be addressed at home and overseas. Manifest destiny drove both society's and the church's vision. Church leadership picked up on the opportunities that this presented and reorganized the multiplicity of boards and committees into an efficient centralized bureaucracy capable of addressing demanding tasks such as the development of new churches domestically and foreign mission internationally.

Corporate Denomination

From 1890 to 1900 Presbyterian denominations planted over 2,000 new churches.[18] But the inefficiency of multiple boards lacked coordination. There was the Board of Home Missions plus a women's home mission board. There was the Freedmen's Board reaching out to former slaves. There was the Church Erection Board (building manses and churches), and boards to deal with evangelism, chaplains, publications, Sabbath School, temperance and moral welfare. Consolidation, organization, efficiency, and centralization were needed.

Nearly all major denominations restructured in the 1920's and again in the 1970's and 1980's using models drawn from the world of business and management sciences.[19] In 1920 the PCUSA formed the Special Committee on the Reorganization and Consolidation of Boards and Agencies. The results approved in 1922 lasted for half a century. The plan called for strong executive leadership, direction and centralization. This was rather countercultural for Presbyterians who have always valued shared leadership and decision-making. But this was a function of cultural adaptation to an age when strong leaders carried the day. Robert E. Speer, secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions, stepped forward with a plan for the committee that increasingly relied on experts well placed in the church bureaucracy. It was driven by centralized finances and it provided for administrative coordination.[20]

The reorganization that was put in place in 1923 consolidated a dozen boards into three:
1. Board of Foreign Missions
2. Board of National Missions
3. Board of Christian Education

This is important for our consideration of presbyteries because the Board of National Missions interfaced significantly with presbyteries as they developed into the 1970's.

An insight into this relationship with the Board of National Missions (BNM) is seen in the 1905 PCUSA General Assembly Minutes. It includes a list of Synodical Missionaries or Superintendents. These were field staff assigned by the Board to the synods and these staff implemented the Board's mission work in the United States. The report declared that, "the Board shall act only in an advisory capacity [to presbyteries regarding ministers for vacant and supply situations], except in the matter of applications for pecuniary aid."[21] In other words, the Board could not

interfere in the placement of pastors, but if the presbytery asked for aid for a church, the board could say yes or no and had other influence. The Board could also take initiative in starting new churches because it had the money to make it happen.

Lewis Wilkins summarizes the different developments in the PCUSA and the PCUS of the 1920's by noting that in the PCUSA domestic mission was the work of national boards under direction of national staff. Presbyteries existed primarily for constitutional purposes (governance and ordering ministries) and to encourage financial support of mission boards. In the PCUS, mission was added to the role of governance and ordering ministries. Staff was called and funded by presbyteries.[22]

By 1925 we find that the PCUSA Board of National Missions staff included a superintendent in each synod plus a staff person in fourteen major urban "specially designated presbyteries."[23] These national staff worked closely with presbytery and synod committees.[24] Staffing for mission came from the top.[25]

The PCUSA staff increased each year and by 1934 the synod superintendents were referred to as executives. The 1955 BNM report noted that field staff worked in close cooperation with synod and presbytery committees.[26]

After 1900 the presbyteries increased in geographical size while declining in the number of presbyteries.[27] This was a function of several factors: improved transportation, increasing population, and increasing programmatic role for presbytery-based staff. In the PCUSA the boards appointed field staff even before the 1923 reorganization.[28]

The missionary and project numbers declined until we find in 1965 that there were 2,617 Mission Enterprises and 2,546 Mission Personnel (typically a quarter of whom were women) of which more than 1,100 were ministers of churches. However, there were by then 585 headquarters and field staff including exempt and non-exempt.[29]

The United Presbyterian Church of North America Precursor

The 1930 UPCNA Home Mission Congress reported that, "the home mission task of establishing churches in this country has about come to an end." A 1952 report of the Board of American Missions lamented this statement because the UPCNA planted very few churches in those twenty years. In fact, in the 1940's only 48 churches were started in this smallest of the three predecessor denominations.[30] The denomination had failed to start enough new churches to keep up with the population growth while the PCUSA and the PCUS had made significant advances in the previous decade and were committed to the same in the years ahead.[31]

The Board tried to address this problem of limited funds by asking established churches to provide their buildings as collateral for new churches. The response was almost nil. The two that did agree did so only for churches some distance from their own. This foretold a problem that would emerge for all three denominations. As the boards entrusted with starting new churches found their direct access to funds limited by a centralized system, and as the restructuring of the early 1970's moved "mission to the lowest possible judicatory," presbyteries would assume more responsibility for new church starts.

The experience of the UPCNA's failed efforts to engage established congregations was a precursor of how new church development would be blocked and how it declined dramatically in the decades ahead. Politically it would be much more difficult to convince a presbytery to initiate a new church if established churches adjacent to the proposed site were threatened by the new "competition." The "not-in-my-back-yard" attitude of perceived self interest and the political problems of overcoming that resistance would undermine new church development.

This would not be the only dynamic affecting the establishment of new churches in presbyteries from the 1960's onward, but it represented a major change. In the early decades of American Presbyterianism voluntary societies

and individual congregations and pastors would provide entrepreneurial impetus for new churches. In the mid-nineteenth century denominational boards were formed and they were free to take unimpeded initiative in places needing churches. Over a period of time presbyteries challenged the lack of consultation and attention to their constitutional prerogatives in approving pastors and starting churches. This led to an era in which presbyteries were increasingly calling the shots resulting in fewer and fewer churches being started.

We continue to have a low level of new church development. What does this suggest about the emerging role of presbyteries? Would more direct initiatives from congregations change this?

The Presbytery in the 1960's

During the 1960's the UPCUSA Board of National Missions began "to shift mission coordination and implementation from a national staff to the synods and presbyteries."[32] The 1963 Special Committee on Regional Synods and Church Administration focused on one agenda item for the Board of National Missions staff – metropolitan areas and the enhancement of urban mission strategies. "The denominational bureaucracies, which had been potent agents of mission for almost a century, looked for new frontiers to challenge the heart, imagination, and support of American Presbyterians."[33]

Paralleling the reconciliation theme in what became the *Confession of 1967*, the 1963 committee said that "church structures…exist for mission and must be designed for mission." Richard Reifsnyder observed, "Judicatories were agents of mission, not simply units of church government for the preservation of faith and doctrine."[34] This obviously represented a dramatic change from the original role of presbyteries defined in 1706.

"A Design for Mission" was presented to the General Assembly in 1968. It noted the confusing staff relationships between the General Assembly and "lower judicatories."

> …the committee believed that clarity of administrative relationships and better churchwide planning were the organizational keys to the church's renewal for mission…Each judicatory was to be an agent of mission, but each would develop and execute its specific proposals in light of the strategy and guidelines developed by the next higher judicatory…Each judicatory, from the session through the General Assembly, was both a structure of ecclesiastical government and an agent of mission accountable for initiating, implementing, and evaluating mission.[35]

Great confidence and trust in "process" and "managers" was assumed. "Planning, Budgeting and Evaluation," a management tool borrowed from General Motors, was employed for this top-down organizational scheme, but when grass roots resistance came, it was quickly abandoned. The assumption was that "managers" could facilitate communication throughout the system and the process would result in everyone agreeing on a unified church mission. Presbyteries and their staff would propagate the mission and rally support, abetted by pastors. However, the denomination had long since lost any agreement on the meaning of "mission."[36]

The 1970's Reorganizations

The reorganization of the 1920's has been far reaching, even to this day. Not only did this major restructuring determine PCUSA institutions until the 1970's, the 1920's were also the decade of the modernist-fundamentalist controversy. The 1925 General Assembly decided to resolve the issues through its Special Commission by focusing on unity at the expense of theological consensus. These two events went hand in hand because unity was built around staff and centralized funding. William McAtee observed of the 1970's,

One of the current perceptions related to the unity of the Church, in the United Presbyterian Church at least, is that the glue which holds the church together is its staff and money. Those holding this perception often set forth an understanding that the Presbyterian system is a 'connectional' system of church government. Because we are

a 'connectional church,' they say, there should be some form of management policy covering staff and money throughout all of the church as a practice consistent with the theory of the 'unity' of the Church.[37]

McAtee quotes Lefferts A. Loetschar (*The Broadening Church*) who contends that the early 20th century required centralizing administrative power in order to manage the rapidly expanding home and foreign mission work.

> …the Presbyterian Church was forced, in order to preserve its unity, to decentralize control over theological beliefs of its ministers and candidates for the ministry. The problem of power and freedom has thus been solved to date by simultaneously increasing administrative centralization and decreasing theological centralization; increasing physical power while at the same time anxiously seeking to prevent trespassing on the realm of the Spirit. This also was a concession to the pluralistic character of modern culture.[38]

Part of this centralization of administrative and mission functions that began in the early part of the 20th century was the way in which the Board of National Missions began to place staff in the field. The BNM would hire missionaries to start new churches and initiate numerous other mission enterprises. The BNM would pay them and determine their work. Some in the presbyteries, understandably, saw this as "ecclesiastical imperialism" and a "we-know-best-what-you-need" attitude from the national office.

Lack of confidence and buy-in from the presbyteries grew and, by 1967, giving to the national agencies began to decline. There were several reasons for this financial decline:
- The consensus was beginning to fray due to lack of local ownership
- Churches were taking local initiatives and spending money on them
- General Assembly moved into agendas not supported locally
- The funding system and assumptions had outlived their usefulness[39]

The post-war Board of National Missions leadership was moving on new agendas such as the inner city and racial concerns that were not embraced broadly in the church.[40] As McAtee puts it, "Specifically, some reacted to the 'declaratory deliverances' of the General Assembly and its ensuing programs."[41]

By 1971 the presbyteries began inheriting some of the deployed national staff in the wake of decreasing funds. Resistance was mounting to the top down flow of power, staff, money and services, along with the demand for funds to support them. Administrative fiat from the Board of National Missions was seen as a way around presbytery decisions.

The 1972 UPCUSA reorganization and decentralization (Overture H) was a way for the General Assembly to maintain the threatened unity by distributing responsibility for "mission at the lowest possible judicatory." At the same time, the Council on Administrative Services (CAS) was created nationally to exercise another channel for continued control of staffing and funding.[42] Power was quickly shifting to the presbyteries and CAS and its funding control of presbytery staffing was in rapid decline in the reunited church (1983).[43]

In the PCUS, the Ad Interim Committee on Restructuring Boards and Agencies (1972) brought recommendations that very much paralleled the UPCUSA developments.

> …there was an incredible confidence that effective management processes were the essential means to create a consensus. Mission was being decentralized at the presbytery and synod levels, and thus executive staff burgeoned in these middle governing bodies…[44]

Wilkins proposes that the outcome of the 1970's reorganizations was the emergence of two types of presbyteries.

The first was the "Comprehensive Program Presbytery." These developed in large metropolitan areas and were multi-staff with a manager-executive overseeing an elaborate structure, often one that mirrored the national structure with program divisions and committees with staff specialists. Even smaller presbyteries (constitutional) were now expected at least to have an executive when they had only had a stated clerk from their beginnings.[45] It

was assumed that all presbyteries would follow this model, but most were beginning to resist taking their cues from the national trends.

The second model was the "Congregational Mission Support Presbytery" which developed from the late 1960's. This model was more responsive to local needs rather than denominational intentions. It recognized issues between congregations and the denomination (mistrust and threat of schism) resulting from rethinking the role of the structure, especially in union presbyteries. [46]

> The identifying characteristic of this presbytery type is a focus on enabling congregations to be healthy and effective in mission. This focus leads the Congregational Mission Support Presbytery to take its own members and churches seriously as sources of wisdom about God's purposes and the principles that will guide their work together in presbytery. It does not assume that purposes and principles are given to it from without or that its only task is to conform its structure and mission to denominational norms. Distinct patterns of presbytery life are built on the foundation of this perspective. [47]

Referring to Roof, McKinney and Wuthnow, Wilkins argues for this model, noting that, "The era of the American evangelical denomination as a connected, coherent, and potent mission enterprise is over." [48] The underlying consensual understanding of mission (churching the unchurched) made unity and centralization possible in an earlier day, but that day is long past.

> While General Assemblies did not have coercive hierarchical power to force presbyteries to play assigned roles in mission, the mission frontiers they defined made sense…Since about 1960, presbyteries have not been pulled by a convincing denominational vision and have been left to their own devices to decide what role they will play in the mission of the Presbyterian Church. [49]

Regulatory Agency

As noted at the beginning of this paper, Craig Dykstra and James Hudnut-Beumler describe the last part of the 20th century as a period when most denominations reverted to a regulatory model of leadership. Presbyteries were not immune from this development.

Chuck Denison, writing about the history of new church development, summarizes the story that brings us to this most recent period. [50] He notes that from 1890 to 1900 Presbyterian denominations planted over 2,000 new churches. The Board of National Missions was organized in 1923 and continued to start new churches. In the 1950's 1,345 new churches were initiated. In the tumultuous 1960's,

> …the denomination was caught up in important issues of civil rights, Viet Nam and social justice as priorities. By 1965 the priority had deliberately shifted, from new churches to changing society. New organizations and offices were begun to effectively address these concerns and reflect the new priorities. In 1972 [with reorganization] the Board of National Missions voted itself out of existence. The nation was no longer seen as a mission field, and new church development became the initiative and concern of the presbyteries. [51]

Membership loses began in 1966[52] and have continued unabated to this day. "The presbyteries of the PC(USA) initiate approximately 30 – 40 churches per year…The denomination loses 30,000 – 60,000 members annually. Clearly the membership lose in our denomination is directly related to de-emphasizing new church development." [53]

How does this history of new church development and membership decline affect presbyteries? Efforts have not been successful in stopping the membership and money erosion, so the tendency for presbyteries is to try to regulate the system to get the desired results.

Reifsnyder observes that the 1983 reunion envisioned a reorganization that would enable the presbyteries and synods to do mission. With that came a continued strong emphasis on providing executive staffing at those levels. Reifsnyder observes,

> …the shift of focus to mission at the synod and presbytery levels over the past several decades has created the presence of a strong executive staff [at the presbytery and synod level] who tend to work as a countervailing force to the national structure."[54]

Twentieth century tendencies at regulation from the General Assembly level have declined sharply at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Most General Assembly leaders will readily admit that they have little possibility of controlling developments.

Most presbytery executives will admit the same. Before the decline of General Assembly regulatory behavior, some middle governing bodies (especially presbyteries) have tried to assert authority over congregations. Struggles over the payment of per capita (a funding stream for basic governance costs) would be one example. The control of church property has also been pursued in civil court and represents another case in point. Extensive policy manuals would be a third.

Coalter, Mulder and Weeks describe how this has developed in the final volume of *The Presbyterian Presence* series.

> …the institutional fluidity and the missionary consensus of evangelical Protestantism disappeared after the War Between the States. In its place would arise the American denomination as a corporation and a civil war within American Presbyterianism and mainstream Protestantism.[55]

Quoting Loescher and referring to the 1920's reorganization and the modernist-fundamentalist controversy of the same decade, they contend,

> The streamlining of denominational administration presupposed a broad consensus about theology and mission, but the fundamentalist controversy prompted the PCUSA to strip the denomination of its ability to define its faith, by lodging theological authority in presbyteries."[56]

There was no longer any theological or missiological consensus in the denomination and often not even in the presbyteries. For two centuries there was basic agreement, but in the last century it became more and more of an illusion. The attempt to resolve theological issues in the first half of the 20th century with polity answers has resulted in presbyteries with widely different perspectives. Even within most presbyteries there is major disagreement.

> This expectation of a fundamental consensus represents the traditional theological foundation for Presbyterian connectional systems where congregational policies and programs are coordinated and even directed by regional and national governing bodies in the interest of common Christian piety, witness, and social justice.[57]

But this is no longer possible. Attempts have been made through the expansion of the *Book of Order* to legislate behavior for which there was no consensus, much less commitment. This is seen as increasingly futile.

Reifsnyder reminds us that,

> Historically, Presbyterians have often sought to resolve their doctrinal differences by focusing on mission, but there is less clarity on what the fundamental mission of the church is. The consensus that the church was to spread the gospel so that people would become believers in Jesus Christ, establish worshipping communities and building churches, has waned as the frontier has disappeared, both nationally and globally?[58]

The 1925 Life and Work slogan "doctrine divides but service unites"[59] has been proven wrong in the broad ecumenical circles which had so much hope for this maxim as the basis of unity. Presbyterians are discovering its problems in this denomination.

Coalter, Mulder and Weeks raised the seriousness of these issues when they drew the conclusion from their research that a major factor in Presbyterian decline was the theological, cultural and ecclesiastical gap which has developed between congregations and governing bodies. They contend that this divide is possibly more problematic than liberal/conservative issues.[60]

They further contend that we now have a division between the "congregational church" and the "governing body church." This is the problem of the regulatory denomination. "The regulatory mentality of contemporary American Presbyterianism also fails to recognize the limits of legislation in voluntary organizations like the church…Ironically, the more they govern the weaker they become."[61] The authors observe the irony that at the 1983 reunion we shifted the terminology from "church courts" (PCUS) and "judicatories" (UPCUSA) to "governing bodies."

This was the climate at the beginning of the twenty-first century from which presbyteries were learning that regulatory postures have failed. They can not look to the denomination for new models, so they must discover new possibilities as presbyteries and communities of presbyteries.

Conclusion

The publication of *The Presbyterian Presence* series (1990 – 1992) has alerted us to our history and to an emerging new era that moves beyond the regulatory model to a future that is yet to emerge. The recent removal from the *Book of Order* of the explicit prohibition for church officers of sexual relationships outside the marriage of a man and a woman has simply served to focus the conversation even more dramatically. However, the issue of the definition and meaning "denomination" in a presbyterian polity goes much deeper that this immediate issue. As noted earlier, most would agree that synods and the General Assembly no longer labor under the illusion of control. Presbytery leaders have virtually all come to this conclusion regarding the reality in their relationship to congregations. It may be that some form of Lewis Wilkins' model of the "Congregational Mission Support Presbytery" (see page 17, footnote #46) is the paradigm that is emerging. This seems to represent how most presbyteries today want to define themselves.

In November, 1997, the Worldwide Ministries Division (WMD) of the PC(USA) held a watershed conference in St. Louis entitled, "Congregations in Global Mission: New Models for a New Century." Two powerful statements were made by keynoters at that event:
- Worldwide Ministries Division Director Marian McClure: "Congregations do mission and they need partners."
- Austin Seminary mission professor Sherron George: "The congregation is the basic agency for global mission."

These statements could not have been made as few as ten years earlier by leadership in the PC(USA). The emerging consensus today is this: When it comes to mission, it's about the congregations. This is not "congregational" polity. It is foundational missiology. There is emerging a clear understanding that the three more inclusive governing bodies exist to nurture missional churches. This returns us to the important observation with which we began: "Presbyteries could have an important role in nurturing missional church behavior."

This will not exhibit itself in any regulatory manner. Rather than presbytery as a dictatorial corporate bishop, it will claim its proper authority through a nurturing of community that will focus the attention of congregations on their apostolic sentness as missional churches recognizing their missionary situation. A "company of pastors"

model will be a more faithful approach than having a comprehensive *Book of Order* or Manual of Operations. The proponents of the recently approved new *Form of Government* see it as assisting in the missional vision.

Matters of governance will also come into play as the PC(USA) contends with a future vision of the root meaning of presbyterian governance. The centrality of presbyteries and an emerging redefinition of their role after the "regulatory era" will continue to emerge and shape the culture of the PC(USA) more dramatically than anything since the 1920's.

Insights from *The Presbyterian Presence* series help us understand how presbyteries have functioned in a 1) constitutional model of church and how they adapted to a 2) corporate understanding of the church and even embraced a 3) regulatory view of their role. Although it is hard to see the third (regulatory) as helpful for any context, the first two (constitutional and corporate) were contextually appropriate. What does the future hold in a post-Christendom church? I would suggest a missional model focused on the congregation. In this understanding presbyteries surely use some of the previous patterns, but principally they return to the understanding that the basic unit of mission is the congregation and the presbytery exists to encourage missional churches. This does not preclude the governance role of the presbytery, but it will look much different than it did during the past century.

Mennonite missiologist Wilbert R. Shenk puts it this way, "…the New Testament leaves no doubt as to the fundamental purpose of the church but does not prescribe the polity or form of the church."[62] Shenk further observes that the Apostle Paul does not focus on structure and form, but rather on commitment and discipleship and missionary vocation which must always be seen as the purpose of polity. This does not mean that Paul had no interest in polity or that all polity is a faithful demonstration of authority. Neither does it mean that our present assumptions about church structures are beyond our dictum, "the church reformed, always being reformed according to the Word of God."

What it does mean is that our post-Christendom future does not need to be tied to the corporate/regulatory model for presbytery that is the only form that those of us living today in the PC(USA) have known. If we believe that the missional church vision is a faithful expression of the Christian church, then we must be prepared for a new way of being presbytery.

David B. McCarthy constructively roots us in our heritage when he helpfully reminds us that there is no sacrosanct application of presbyterian polity.

> John Calvin, to whom Presbyterianism owes much of its polity, acknowledged the flexible nature of church polity, recognizing that church organization must change 'according to the varying condition of the times.' [*Institutes*, IV.7.15] Amid these changes, however, some 'general rules' [*Institutes*, IV.10.30] and theological principles of polity can be discerned, and among those are order, equality, and accountability.[63]

This understanding of how presbytery's role in post-Christendom can develop may serve as a portal into further conversation about the role of the presbytery in nurturing missional churches.

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[1] N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, SPCK and Westminster/John Know Press, Ashford Colour Press, Perthshire, 2004, pp. 63 – 65.

[2] Conversation with Robert Wood Lynn, April 7, 1992.

[3] Christendom: the era which began with the baptism of Constantine in the 4th century after which the Christian worldview played an increasingly dominate role in the west. The 20th century marked the end of Christian hegemony in the face of secular nationalism which no longer allowed for this connection between religion and the political order. The new emerging church of the Global South raises the question of *The Next Christendom* (Philip Jenkins).

[4] Wayne W. Allen, "Overview and Reflection: The History of the Synod of the Trinity and its Antecedents," unpublished paper, 2002, p. 2.

[5] Ibid.,

[6] Ibid. pp. 2 - 5

[7] Ibid., p. 5.

[8] An important reminder is due here. The history being recounted is of what is today the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA). The Civil War caused a split in that denomination and the creation of what was known in the 20th century as the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), what has been called the "southern church" as compared to the "northern" church. Another stream, the United Presbyterian Church of North America (UPCNA) was created out of a merger in 1858 and the UPCNA merged with the PCUSA in 1958 to form the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA). Our present Presbyterian Church (USA) was completed with the 1983 reunion of northern and southern streams. There are far more comparisons than differences in these denominations, but I will generally be referring to the PCUSA which was by far the largest of the three. Occasionally I will make note of the others.

[9] Craig Dykstra and James Hudnut-Beumler, "The National Organization of Protestant Denominations: An Invitation to a Conversation," *The Organizational Revolution*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, pp. 307 – 331. It is important to remember that the transition between these phases takes several decades and each phase has elements of the other two.

[10] Lewis L. Wilkins, Jr., "The American Presbytery in the Twentieth Century," in *The Organizational Revolution: Presbyterians and American Denominationalism*, Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks, eds., Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, p. 110; The 1788 *Form of Government* defined a presbytery's role as, "Cognizance of all things that regard the welfare of the particular churches within their bounds…receiving and issuing appeals from the sessions…examining, and licensing candidates for the gospel ministry…ordaining, settling, removing, or judging ministers…resolving questions of doctrines or discipline…condemning erroneous opinions…visiting particular churches…uniting or dividing Congregations…ordering whatever pertains to the spiritual concerns of the Churches under their care." (Chapter IX)

[11] Ibid., p. 101.

[12] See David W. A. Taylor, "A History of PCUS Program Structures," May 6, 1981 unpublished paper. [Papyrus # 1520]

[13] David Dawson, "A Recurring Issue of Mission Administration," *Missiology*, October, 1997, p. 457 – 465; see also Thomas C. Pears, Jr., *A Brief Sketch of the Western Foreign Missionary Society*, c. 1930.

[14] Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South, Volume One: 1607 – 1861*, John Knox Press, Richmond, 1963, p. 514.

[15] Ibid. However, John Bailey Adger argued that it was potentially dangerous for the Secretary of the Board for Domestic Missions to have the power to discharge 600 ordained ministers without reference to the authority of presbytery.

[16] "…James Henley Thornwell…argued that the mission of the church was linked to the presbytery, not to agencies that worked in behalf of the entire denomination."   Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder, Louis B. Weeks, *Vital Signs*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1996, p. 103.

[17] Trends are obvious and dramatic over the past 40 years. In the 1960's 30% of the General Assembly budget came from restricted funds. Now it is probably more than 90%. The dramatic decline in undesignated giving has also been devastating presbytery budgets.

[18] Chuck Denison, *Connectional Church Development*, Evangelism and Witness of the General Assembly Council, PC(USA), 2005, p. 5.

[19] PC(USA) and its antecedents restructured in 1922, 1958 (UPCUSA merger), 1972, 1983 (PCUSA reunion), and again in the 1990's (9 units to 3 divisions which very much resemble the 1923 structure). This restructuring at the General Assembly level has persisted in the first decade of the 21st century. The GA has reorganized at least once in literally every decade for the last 50 years.

[20] Richard W. Reifsnyder, "Managing the Mission: Church Restructuring in the Twentieth Century" in *The Organizational Revolution: Presbyterians and American Denominationalism*, Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks, eds., Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, p. 55.

[21] Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, Office of the General Assembly, Philadelphia, 1905, p. 107.

[22] Wilkins, p. 104.

[23] There were over 8,000 "Mission Enterprises" (churches, schools, hospitals, community centers, Sunday Schools, etc.) served by 4,358 "Missionary Personnel." Ibid., 1925, pp. 297ff.

[24] In the UPCNA each presbytery was encouraged to appoint a Committee of Home Missions and name a minister as Superintendent of Missions to serve as an, "organ of communication between the Presbytery and the Board, and perform such duties as the Assembly may direct." Each presbytery appointed one delegate to represent it on the General Committee of Homes Missions which, "shall refer the appointment of missionaries to the Board [BHM] subject to the approval of Presbytery [and] presbyteries shall indicate to the Board the men referred by them to be employed in their bounds" *Digest of the Principle Acts and Deliverances of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church of North America from 1859 – 1902*, United Presbyterian Board of Publication, Pittsburgh, 1903, pp. 169 – 173.

[25] The duties and power of UPCNA presbyteries into the early 1900's was, "to hear and issue complaints and appeals from church Sessions, and references for advice or adjudication, to admit and have the care of students of theology, to examine and license candidates for the holy ministry, to ordain, install, remove and try ministers of the Gospel, to examine and approve or censure the records of church Sessions, to visit particular churches for the purpose of inquiring into their state, and redressing evils which may have arisen in them, to organize, unite, or divide congregations, and in general to order whatever pertains to the spiritual welfare and prosperity of the churches under its care." Ibid., p. 20.

[26] There were now 38 executives in synods and 17 in presbyteries plus an additional 45 field assistants in regular contact with missionaries of all types. These last two groups eventually become presbytery executives. The report even talks about organizing broadcasting committees in 23 synods and 120 presbyteries as the national staff moves further and further into extensive and varied programming. PCUSA *Minutes*, 1955, pp. 90 – 115.

[27] PCUSA from 1930 – 1980 the number of presbyteries declined from 293 to 186. In the PCUS from 92 to 59. The UPNA had 33 presbyteries in 1930. Ibid., p. 108.

[28] The General Assembly "…created the Board of National Missions equipped with a highly articulate, centralized 'national staff' to do the work of mission in the United States in an efficient, nationally coordinated way." Ibid., p. 109.

[29] Ibid., 1965, Part 2, pp. 93 - 115.

[30] James K. Leitch, *May We Introduce - Church Extension*, Board of American Missions, UPCNA, Pittsburgh, 1952, pp. 2, 10. The UPCNA had a similar system of field superintendents.

[31] The report blames this failure on the fact that the boards were not allowed to mount special financial campaigns (although the colleges, nursing homes, and camps had been soliciting money) for the advancement of their work. On the other hand, the PCUSA spent $12 Million from 1941 – 1951 to start 257 new churches and in 1952 the PCUSA General Assembly authorized a capital campaign including more than $7 million for new churches. The PCUS had a five year campaign that started 267 (one a week) new churches. Ibid., p. 8.

[32] Reifsnyder, p. 66.

[33] Wilkins describes these frontiers as: 1) suburbia (but, early in the 1960's we quit building new churches to following the population); 2) inner city; racial ethnic concerns. (Wilkins, pp. 111 – 113.)

[34] Reifsnyder, p. 67.

[35] Ibid., pp. 68 - 69.

[36] Ibid., p. 69; The "secular sixties" highlighted the dramatic and profound differences in the operative definitions of mission. The World Council of Churches 1960's program, "The Missionary Structure of the Congregation," suggested a hopeful conversation that proved disappointing. See Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, p. 206 and *Signs Amid the Rubble*, pp. 95 – 109. See also the *Comprehensive Mission Funding Strategy* Report, 210th General Assembly (1998), *Minutes,* pp. 209-23; Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder and Louis B. Weeks, *Vital Signs: The Promise of Mainstream Protestantism*.

[37] W. G. McAtee, "Circulating Funds in the Re-United Church," unpublished paper, n.d. (c. 1982), p. 1

[38] Lefferts A. Loetschar, *The Broadening Church*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1954, p. 93.

[39] An important aspect of the evolution of presbyteries could well be told by simply "following the money." Whereas "unified giving" was still being seen by many at the end of the 20th century as the "theologically correct" way for Presbyterians to give to mission, presbyteries have been forced by reality to rethink the mission funding assumptions of the corporate denomination. See the *Comprehensive Mission Funding Strategy* Report, 210th General Assembly (1998), *Minutes*, pp. 209-233; David Dawson, "Mission Funding in the Future," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, July 26, 2004.

[40] See Wilkins, pp. 111 – 113.

[41] McAtee, p. 2.

[42] McAtee, p. 3 This paper was written a decade later at the time of impending reunion of the PCUSA and the PCUS, partly to address the issue of CAS. McAtee says, "Some have observed that this revision appears as a bureaucratic contrivance to evoke a certain sanction supporting a need for this particular agency [CAS] under question in order to strengthen the possibility of its inclusion in the reunited church. It is also interesting to note that the role of the Council on Administrative Services is couched in classic 'connectional glue' terminology – 'personnel and budgeting." (p. 3)

[43] The PCUS system was different. National missions field staff were directly under the supervision and control of the presbyteries. Unity was "familial and relational," flowing from the bottom upwards. But the PCUS system was changing to more closely resemble the UPCUSA. Funds also began to decline in the late 1960's but there was no "circulating funds" (money returned by CAS for staff). (McAtee, p. 4)

[44] Reifsnyder, pp. 75, 76, and 84.

[45] Wilkins, p. 115 – 116. Wilkins believes that this explains some of the tension between presbytery executives and stated clerks.

[46] Ibid., pp. 115 – 116.

[47] Ibid., p. 117.

[48] Ibid., p. 118; see also Eileen Lindner's comments in "Moderator's Conference Explores PC(USA) Demographics, Future," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, December 19, 2005, p. 5.

[49] Wilkins, p. 118.

[50] Chuck Denison, *Connectional Church Development*, Evangelism and Witness of the General Assembly Council, PC(USA), 2005.

[51] Ibid., p. 5. Presbyteries had no interest either. In the WCC, Leslie Newbigin saw this development when it became clear to him that the congregation was seen simply as the source of finances for social amelioration. This led to his departure from the WCC and return to India.

[52] Presbyterian membership as a percentage of US population actually began early in the 20th century.

[53] Denison, p. 6.

[54] Reifsnyder, pp. 84 – 85, 92; also see *The Presbyterian Outlook*, March 28, 1988, p. 8.

[55] Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder, Louis B. Weeks, *The Re-forming Tradition: Presbyterians and Mainstream Protestantism*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, p. 100.

[56] Ibid., p. 125; see also William J. Weston, *Presbyterian Pluralism: Competition in a Protestant House* and *Leading from the Center: Strengthening the Pillars of the Church*.

[57] Ibid., p. 230.

[58] Reifsnyder, p. 94.

[59] George Lindbeck, "The Unity We Seek," *Christian Century*, August 9, 2005; Charles W. Forman attributes this to John R. Mott. (July 7, 2005 conversation)

[60] "It is actually the increasing tendency of the governing bodies of the PC(USA) to substitute legislation for education, to impose policies rather than persuade people to change." Coalter, Mulder and, *The Re-forming Tradition: Presbyterians and Mainstream Protestantism*, 1992, p. 268.

[61] Ibid., p. 267 - 270.

[62] Wilbert R. Shenk, "New Wineskins for the New Wine: Toward a Post-Christendom Ecclesiology," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, April, 2005, p. 79; See also Andrew Walls.

[63] David B. McCarthy, "The Emerging Importance of Presbyterian Polity," in *The Organizational Revolution*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, 1992, p. 303.