

A CALL TO THE CHURCH

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221st General Assembly PCUSA

When I speak as Moderator of the PCUSA, it is critical to understand my role. I have no authority. My role is to serve as interpreter of the past General Assembly and to be an Ambassador to the denomination. That is it!! And it is a privilege to serve in those ways.

Increasingly this year I have been aware of another role that is expected, though not stated, for the moderator. As many of you know, my primary mission these two years has been and continues to be “to listen and to love”. And I have been listening. Over and over I have had people say, “Listen to our pleas of concern for the church, and as Moderator, do something about them.’. But my “powers” are limited. I am not a bishop nor a Pope, nor do I want to be. All I have is a platform on which to stand and speak, and I continue to pray that God will allow me to use it wisely and appropriately as my love for this Church has only grown in these past months.

It is in that context that I share the following.

Recently I called together a small task force of individuals to help focus on financial support in the area of Global Mission. This task force was comprised of two former moderators, two seminary presidents, two very successful business people who are also ordained PCUSA ministers, a staff member who works in the area of missions, and me.

We began our conversation by trying to understand the current status of our Global Mission program, its financial condition, and if it was something where we could interject some ideas which might help forestall the crises of bringing home mission co workers from the field. I will confess to having a broader vision about the potential for our

work, for I knew that many other areas of our denomination at the national, regional and local levels, were also dealing with major budget shortfalls. My hope was that if a model was developed for Global Missions it might be applicable in other arenas of the PCUSA.

What emerged was an amazing and unanimous redefinition of what we should do with our time together. Almost instantly there developed a sense of deep urgency. There was a feeling that the issues related to funding Global Missions in the PCUSA were much more intense than just what was happening in that program. It became apparent that we all believed a painful situation existed and for anything significant to be accomplished we must find ways for that trust to be restored. It was felt that our denomination needed to explore these matters in depth and that I should announce a CALL TO THE CHURCH to help in addressing them.

Mid-level judicatories, missions and ministries across the church, individual members, pastors, educators and financial donors, church administrators, staff and elected leaders of the national church share a common feeling that the current understanding of who we are as a denomination as well as our system of organizational operatives for executing our initiatives are not working anymore. The need for reform is urgent. As Moderator I have had in depth conversations with people from every level of the church, and here are some of the major issues which I have identified as consistent responses. They will not be a surprise to most of you:

A. There is a profound and rapid change in the world around us that has put the Church's relevance in question in ways we have not seen in our lifetime.

B. Not having a permanent current CEO in our Presbyterian Mission Agency, and having a Stated Clerk who is not going to seek reelection, has offered us a Kairos moment which is unique.

C. We are indeed facing a crisis where there is lack of trust across the church. This is manifested in many ways but includes – departing

congregations, confused members concerning who we are as the PCUSA, disinterested local sessions and congregations when it comes to national church initiatives (unless they are controversial) struggling mid-councils, frustrated and anxious staff in our national offices, many of whom are wary and disillusioned, and financial supporters who are seeking other ways than through our denomination to share their money.

D. Our theological institutions, who have provided a foundational element of our denomination historically, are also victims of this unrest and the “old models” of seminary education being handled in the ways of the past by the same deliverers is under scrutiny.

E. We must act to remedy some of these matters and we must do so with haste. I hear loudly and clearly that we do not have the luxury of time to discern and debate.

While this call necessarily involves many entities, it is important for congregations and members to know that they comprise the body of the PCUSA and it is with them in mind that I am speaking out. I have heard their cries for change and that we seek God’s will as we move forward. I know there is a disconnect between what members feel is happening at the national and even the Middle Judicatory levels. On one hand I see our organizational leadership trying to do, often in sacrificial ways, what we through our General Assembly have directed and I remind the Church that If we feel they need to of us on different priorities, it is up to us to direct them accordingly through the G.A. As I have observed them closely this year, I find their passion and commitment to service is a gift and a strength as well as provides an incentive for others to become involved in our work. But many people across the Church see something else. They believe that “Louisville” is out of touch with them and that there is not an effective system in place for us to “be the church”. We need to rethink what we are asking our leadership to be and do and to develop a system that works for all of us, and where we affirm that God’s house, and Christ’s table, is large enough for all of us to participate as we seek to do the work of the Kingdom.

But let me also emphasize emphatically that as we make changes, we also need to support the ongoing missions and ministries of our church. We cannot just stop our work as the PCUSA and take a year or two off to figure this out.

So what can be done? And when is it needed?

This call to the Church does not provide the answer, but is more a naming of reality, a speaking of the truth in love, a call to change. And that, my friends, is part of what it means to be a reforming church, a claim we should embrace. Are we listening to God's call for us to do a new thing? And are we willing to risk the comfort and in some ways the traditions of our past in order to accept our place in a resurrected church?

Imagine the image of living in a house which has had many rooms added over the decades. To get from one place to another we have to go outside, walk up stairs, reenter, go downstairs, and go through other rooms to get to where we want to be. This seems ridiculous, but as I have been listening, it seems consistent with what many believe is the current house we live in as a denomination. So we need to move. We need to sort through and decide what to retain and what to give away. We are functioning with a structure and approach that was designed for a church 30 years ago, but is no longer relevant. It is time for us to awaken to the realities of who we are as a denomination in the 21st Century.

So what now?

What might it mean for us to hit the reset button for a new church start? What might it mean for us to practice Sabbath, and engage in a spiritual discipline for the church in order to discern our way? Or better yet, might we instead have a time of Jubilee (Leviticus 25) – which includes offerings of forgiveness, a releasing of what we have held

captive (our current way of “being” church) that we might celebrate Jubilee, the Sabbath of Sabbath practiced every 50 years? Can we find a way to affirm a theological basis for who we are and who we are to be, one that embraces our uniqueness and our differences, and in that context establish the priorities for the church? And once we settle on priorities, can we implement an organizational network that can help us carry it out? Not everything has to change. Some things are working well. But still, a major overhaul is being called for and is needed.

To do this we need to avoid territoriality. This discussion needs to occur in local congregations, in all agencies and mission areas, personnel and governing bodies, advocacy groups, at all levels of the church and in all institutions of the church.

And while a sense of restlessness, of urgency, is good - fear and anxiety is not. We must take bold and immediate steps, and for us Presbyterians who love to discern and debate, it is essential that a resolution be found quickly. According to our polity, the mission, vision and structure of our denomination is determined by our General Assembly which meets every two years. We cannot wait until this upcoming Assembly to appoint a study committee to come back in two years with a recommendation that will take two years to implement. The people in the pews as well as the ongoing health of our organization and our staff says we cannot wait for four years to get this resolved. The need is immediate.

As I have listened and travelled, many individuals and various groups have offered ideas and thoughts about what to do. We have overtures coming to this year’s General Assembly which address some areas related to these matters. How do we function as Christ’s body? They have been conscientiously addressed and brought forward, and have helped to shed light on even broader issues which we are facing. But we need a broad based, overall, consistent understanding of how to proceed, and must do this with the involvement of our entire church. So here is the reality. we have a polity that says our General

Assembly must be the official place to implement change while we as a Church say we cannot wait. Is there any way to move this forward? Where do we start in order to be constructive and productive?, From my perspective it seems appropriate that the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly help us on the first stage of this effort. They are charged with planning and implementing the Assembly's work so it seems appropriate that they be the ones to start the process. Some group has to do it. I have met with a committee from COGA and they are already seeking to address this need. They see that they must address it in an organized but urgent way, with essential networking and information gathering from other agencies and bodies of the denomination. I hear the concern that some people feel which suggests that if we rely on one area of our denomination to take the lead in this process, they may be tempted to control the outcome so that their interests will be served. They feel the same way about any other agency or body taking the lead. This is not a specific condemnation of COGA. Instead it is a general suspicion and unrest with our organization. When the Committee on the General Assembly (COGA) discussed tackling this issue, they recognized that their position needed to be clear and that any bias or preferred outcome from them should not have any more influence than those of other bodies. I am convinced that they believe this and will utilize objective processes and procedures including resources outside of our denomination which can help us hear the will of our membership.

So what suggested specific steps should we take now?

1. Again let me state the obvious. Someone has to take a lead. I am asking that the denomination affirm and actively participate in the COGA process which is getting ready to be unveiled and which will undertake the massive task of assessing the church's will (in accordance with God's will) concerning who and what we need to be as a denomination. I am convinced they (and you) have been heard, and that they wish to hear more – not dictate a future outcome. I am asking that we trust this process unless, as

it is implemented, we find reason not to do so. I am also asking the other 5 Agencies of the Church through their executives and their boards, as well as all bodies of the church, to affirm this effort even knowing that it may bring about some dramatic suggested changes. Our denomination needs to trust that we can and will work together and not focus primarily on issues which divide us or protect turf. Let me add that there are other initiatives which are currently being brought forward by some of the other agencies. It is my hope that these might compliment the study of COGA. One is a survey being undertaken by the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board which is seeking to find ways to determine their future priorities. They are deliberately seeking ways to be faithful in response to the very challenging and upsetting issues which they have faced or addressed and to serve the church in ways that the church is wanting. How this effort interfaces with the overall study of COGA should be coordinated in ways that do not confuse the church nor compete with one another.

2. I ask our church members, local sessions, Middle Governing bodies, advocacy groups, Agency boards, institutional members, people who have felt disenfranchised, people from different theological positions and different cultural and racial backgrounds, staff members at the local and national levels, and all others who care about our denomination to participate expeditiously in order that we might gather data which can help our Portland General Assembly next June to make informed and healthy decisions about our future.
3. I intend to start a series of “Moderator Chats” (these won’t be fireside – maybe they should occur around a communion table – or the Baptismal font?). I propose that we have scheduled talk back sessions with the Moderator and Vice Moderator, as well as other people in leadership positions in the church, where various groups of our denomination will be able to share visions, ideas and hopes so that we might rebuild trust and move forward. Groups should include but not be limited to NEXT Church, The

Covenant Network, The Fellowship Community, Middle Governing board staff, Advocacy groups, National staff members, agency boards, pastors, representatives from both large and small churches, Christian Educators, Church Administrators, representatives from publications, seminarians , youth, and the list goes on. They should also represent the extraordinary diversity which is becoming an increasing part of our identity, and not be the voice only of the privileged who have comprised the majority of membership in our denomination for years. These will be open conversations, meaning that even if they are focused on some particular group, others may listen in, and we will seek ways to have their issues and concerns raised as conversations ensue.

4. I herewith call on the help of seminaries, presbyteries, church related colleges, camp and conference centers to work together, host, sponsor and participate in regional gatherings with commissioners elected to the 222nd General Assembly, as well as other interested Presbyterians, concerning ways to prioritize our work and how to begin to develop our priorities as well as begin a process to develop an organizational system for the reformed PCUSA which is both feasible and adequate. Such a plan should be coordinated with COGA as they unveil their plans for study and feedback. And I also remind us that in our thinking and planning we realize that we are no longer a denomination of 5 million members but 1.7 million instead. Our resources are dramatically different than they were just a few years ago. Yet too many of us expect our denomination to operate in the same manner. That is both unrealistic and unfair to those who serve us.
5. I ask that we enlist that assistance of our communications departments in each agency to assist in advocating participation and sharing the results of this effort. Communication is essential and a key element in restoring trust. This effort must be completely transparent and inclusive.

As I said earlier, I do not have any authority to dictate how this process occurs. Actually I don't have the authority to call for this action. Some who hear of this Call may feel I am overstepping my bounds. And they would be right. But I do believe firmly that we need to act, and to act NOW and believe that the platform afforded the Moderator affirms, or even demands, that I extend this call and challenge. We must make immediate decisions which will allow the 222nd Assembly In Portland to be able to deal realistically with many of the issues before us so they can act, not just appoint study commissions or refer this to ongoing committees. From all across the Church our membership has told me we do not have that luxury.

Also let me share that this effort will be a priority for the remaining months of my moderatorial term, and may require that I alter some of my engagements across the church. I grieve that fact and apologize that I may not fulfill some of the expectations people have for the Moderator to be present in their midst. But I feel called to make this effort a priority.

So let us step out in faith. Let us find ways to move this effort forward. Let us realize that if we make some decisions that don't work as we had hoped, we can change them. It is part of our governing process to make changes and to alter direction when we believe it is important. But let us not act as the "frozen chosen" and sit still and complain or opt out of participation. God is calling us to action. Do you hear? Can you join in?

Whatever avenue is chosen to advance this effort, the honest fact remains that it must happen. And the time is now.

May God guide us all, as well as the Church which we, and God, love.