

***Draft Overture to the Synod of the Northeast
from the Presbytery of Monmouth
September 26, 2017***

The Presbytery of Monmouth overtures the Synod of the Northeast to create a working group including representatives from the seven geographic presbyteries of New Jersey to:

- 1. Work with those presbyteries to ascertain their needs and goals,**
- 2. Examine the present boundaries and structures of those presbyteries,**
- 3. Consider the possibility of redrawing presbytery boundaries, and**
- 4. Make recommendations to the Synod.**

RATIONALE

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has been steadily losing members for the past generation. Our membership is less than half the combined membership of our predecessor denominations at the time of our heyday in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This is especially true among the presbyteries of the Synod of the Northeast, where the secularization of American culture has been proceeding at a more rapid pace than in other regions.

This is not a situation any of us are comfortable with, nor should we be. Downsizing is not the norm for the church of Jesus Christ. Our self-image, based on our founding narrative from the Acts of the Apostles, is that of a steadily growing community.

Our polity reflects this self-understanding. The *Book of Order* provides scant guidance or encouragement for reducing the number of governing councils.

Yet, that does not mean we should refrain from the work of organizing our presbyteries in a realistic way, based on present demographic realities. Our present map of presbyteries in the State of New Jersey — and, indeed, throughout the Synod of the Northeast — is largely unchanged since the Synod was established in 1973. We are simply not the same church we were back then. Many of our presbyteries, within their present boundaries, are struggling to marshal sufficient human and financial resources to effectively support their congregations in fulfilling the Great Commission.

“The Mission of God in Christ gives shape and substance to the life and work of the Church,” says the first foundational section of our Constitution (F-1.01). There was a time when Christ’s mission dictated that the most sensible way to determine presbytery boundaries was the location of railroad lines — which is how a number of our present presbytery boundaries were established. Many of those boundaries are still in place, exactly as they were conceived in the 19th century, long after the original rails have been torn up and removed. Those archaic boundaries have, over time, become so familiar that we have lost touch with the missional impulse that dictated the original design.

We believe it is time to recover that missional impulse, and ask certain fundamental

questions anew. These include:

- What is the purpose of a presbytery?
- What is the optimal size of a presbytery, based on both overall membership and the number of congregations?
- What resources and expertise should a presbytery provide its congregations to enable effective work and witness?
- What geographic, cultural and demographic realities impact decisions about presbytery boundaries?
- What is the unique organizational culture of our various presbyteries, and how may differences in culture affect future cooperation and/or boundary configurations?

Informed by the answers to these questions, the working group would then seek consensus about a new configuration of presbyteries within our State, right-sized for mission in the present day and into the foreseeable future.

NEXT STEPS

It is our intention to share the text of this overture with the other presbyteries within the State, inviting them to concur by sending similar overtures to the Synod. While concurrence with this or a similar overture is not a prerequisite for participating in the discussion, we believe it is beneficial for presbyteries to engage in discussion and vote at this time, so their members may be fully informed. Approval of the overture indicates merely a desire to be included in the conversation, and does not imply consent to any conclusions that may ultimately be reached.