

Synod of the Mid-Atlantic
241st Assembly – Richmond, VA
March 12-13, 2018

A New Initiative - “The Next Generation”

Introduction:

Over the past three years the Synod of the Mid Atlantic has been in a state of inquiry, discovery and discernment regarding its role among the fourteen presbyteries it seeks to serve. As the denomination debated the question over the future of synods, we in the Mid-Atlantic, reviewed our purpose in light of this larger conversation. Ours is a unique synod as we were the last to be organized, the largest to be designed, and the most diverse in our constituency. Mid-Atlantic was the only synod to assimilate four all-Black presbyteries and one Black synod into its new structure resulting from the 1983 Reunion vote of the church. Those presbyteries and synod included Catawba, Cape Fear, Southern Virginia, and Yadkins, and the Catawba Inter-presbytery Agency.

It has been awkward and, at times, an adversarial season of compromises which has led us to our present structure. In a time of rising racial tensions, stoked by the new celebrity of White Supremacist groups in the country, the Synod is finding its ministry renewed by the need to offer an alternative vision of God’s people living in community, witnessing to compassion and justice for all.

Discussion:

At the 240th Synod Assembly, September 11-12, 2017, a draft document for a new initiative was shared with the assembly titled “The Next Generation.” This initiative seeks to respond to the critical shortage of African American Clergy in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the need within every presbytery to be served by able Black leadership. In response to this challenge, the synod would commit itself to identifying, nurturing and serving as advocates for the next generation of African American clergy to serve congregations and councils of the church and throughout the Presbyterian structure.

This proposal and this crisis are not descriptive of the situation in our presbyteries alone. This dilemma is affecting our entire denomination (and other denominations also). The aging of Black clergy and the shrinking resources of our African American congregations as they age has created a bleak outlook for us all. We are looking at the

tragic loss of their witness, their spirit and their voice at a time when civil discourse and civil liberties are being threatened.

Vibrant, imaginative and bold Black leadership is needed in our presbyteries, our communities, our mid-councils and in arenas of ecumenical and interfaith dialogue. The Synod of the Mid-Atlantic is ready, able and poised by God's grace to respond to this need.

If the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. hopes to be a denomination of all people, all races, and all nations it must recommit itself to the work of planting and supporting racial-ethnic congregations. The Gospel imperative does not discriminate. Our passivity...our indifference to the situation of a declining Black presence in our congregations, presbyteries and other governing bodies suggests that we do not and have not found value in the contributions of Black voices in our church.

The time to take a new course of action is now. The sole African American Seminary of the PCUSA, Johnson C. Smith, withdrew from the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta. It no longer offers a Master's Degree Program. Its future is unsure as accreditation lies in limbo. The last wave of African American clergy to matriculate at Johnson C Smith Theological Seminary and other Presbyterian theological schools is fast retiring. Many aged Black pastors are continuing to serve as best they can as it does not appear that relief provided by younger colleagues is on its way.

The viability of almost all of our African American congregations weighs in the balance. Many cannot be redeveloped in time to ensure a future ministry, but many are able to be helped. The best help we can provide is a well-trained pastor excited about the opportunity to serve God through the pulpit of a church.

The "New Initiative" to identify, nurture and advocate "The Next Generation" of African American pastors for the church is a project which we can launch as a mission of the Synod of the Mid-Atlantic. We are the best candidate among all Synods to take on this challenge.

We have:

- A strong cadre of African American leaders both Teaching and Ruling Elders.
- Churches, both black white congregations, who have a legacy of supporting strong Black representation and participation in our denominational work.
- Johnson C. Smith and Union Presbyterian Seminary are located within our bounds. Each has faculty, resources and vision for growing their constituency of racial ethnic students.

- Existing associations of African American leaders in caucuses and affinity groups.
- Access to national groups such as the Lilly Foundation to approach for funding and consultation.

In recent years, Synods have experienced renewed purpose and outreach. They have discerned for themselves a particular compelling mission and vision by which they are known. The Synod of Living Waters was the incubator for the Living Waters for the World mission of providing clean water to communities around the world. The Synod of the Sun, in the same way, is providing solar panels to power communication systems and illuminate villages. It is our time to act.

The Synod of the Mid- Atlantic like no other Synod has experienced the pain and the struggle to come together as an integrated and celebrating body of the PCUSA. We know personally the stories of our African American congregations. We know of their contributions to their communities and to our denomination. We know of their losses as well. And we know that in this time of polarization of race and class and politics that the Black Church can lend its voice to create a healthier dialogue. These congregations however, need renewed leadership and inspired pastors filling their pulpits. We can help and we must; lest we lose the powerful witness of the African American legacy of our church.

- What is outlined and argued in this paper is for a full blown effort to “tip” our Synod forward into the future.
- What is required is a thoughtful and well researched presentation of the facts and the pathways to launch an initiative of such importance.
- What is necessary is to confront those anxieties that insist that our Synod has nothing to contribute to the national character of our church or to the needs of struggling congregations.

The approach we need is to build new alliances within our presbyteries and with our General Assembly networks beginning with racial-ethnic ministries. Other supporting entities might include Research Services, Young Adult and Collegiate programs, our conference centers, our colleges, and our universities. Our P.C.U.S.A. is designed to be a structure of interconnectedness. Let’s use it!

We will need deep thinkers and strategists to provide us with a plan which we can evaluate and commit to, one which gives us small successes and great inspiration.

Or, we can leave this challenge to the generations which follow us. Surely they will find a way. Yet, by stepping away we fail to engage in the work that will change us. We are the

problem and we are, in part, the solution. This challenge comes under our watch. Racism and racial reconciliation have informed our entire lives. The ongoing occurrences of racial strife in America today suggest that the work of peacemaking is yet unfinished. We have an opportunity and a call to do more tomorrow than what we did yesterday or the day before. Even if we do not have perfect answers and flawless approaches, we must acknowledge our complicity to the sin of racism and commit anew to the greatest of commandments to love God with all of our heart and strength and voice and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Proposal:

The Next Generation Initiative Enabling Action

1. The “Next Generation Initiative” was affirmed by the 241st Synod Assembly.
2. The 241st Synod Assembly empowered the Executive Committee to appoint a “team” to plan a strategy to move the Initiative forward to include such features as:
 - conversation and collaboration with identified partners
 - a timeline for actions and engagement
 - a process to share the Initiative with member presbyteries
 - a projection of funding needs
 - considerations for staff support and consultation
3. The sum of \$6000.00 was approved from Presbytery Initiatives Funds for the team to cover expenses related to meetings, travel, production, interviews, research etc.

Next Steps: