



Gathering Together, Nurturing Innovation, Strengthening Communities
Reuniéndonos Juntos, Animando Innovación, Fortaleciendo Comunidades
다같이 모이기 - 공동체를 강화하기 - 혁신을 키워나가기

January 10, 2017

To: Cara Molyneaux, Moderator
Arthur Fullerton, Vice Moderator
Jerry McKinney, former Moderator
Donna Elia, former Moderator
William Levering, Chair, Board of Trustees
James Reisner, Chair, Committee on Self Development of People
Barbara Wheeler, Chair, Personnel Committee

I am in receipt of the letter you submitted to the Albany SARC on December 28, 2016. Since the SARC is a committee of the Synod, I am responding as the Synod Stated Clerk. Unfortunately, your letter arrived in the midst of the holidays. Having been on vacation and study leave, I just returned to the office yesterday. Therefore, this is my first chance to respond.

Let me begin by setting the context in which the Synod Mission and Ministries Commission (Synod Council) creates a special administrative review committee. Over the course of the last three years since Synod Assembly adopted the document, A New Way Forward, much of the Synod's work with presbyteries has been to provide resources and support in a variety of ways. The Commission sees special administrative review committees as a method for providing support to a presbytery when there are concerns raised by members of that presbytery that appear to warrant review and recommendations. It is never something that the Commission seeks out. The Commission only responds.

As we head into the new year, let me share with you the concerns raised in the request for a special administrative review. The request mentioned, in general, irregularities and disregard for the Book of Order as well as the Standing Rules of the Presbytery. The specifics included the following:

- Ineffective Council (Cabinet) oversight of Nominating committee: Standing Rules state that committee should reflect composition of the presbytery (and should, therefore, have approximately equal TEs and REs). Throughout 2015 and much of 2016, there was 1 RE (the chair) and the balance TEs on the committee.
- The appearance of impropriety by slating to PJC from within the Nominating Committee: Two members from the Nominating Committee (the chair/RE, and a

TE) were slated by the committee and elected to PJC by the presbytery. Of equal concern is whether the committee sought appropriate representation from the broader presbytery.

- It would appear that Nominating has failed to slate to the COR (G3.0103) since at least 2012 or 2013—a committee mandated by the Book of Order—when the chair of COR requested a review of the committee’s work.
- The Standing Rules had to be suspended in order to elect delegates to GA222 as Nominating failed to slate the requisite number of nominees in each category.
- Nominating attempted to suspend the Standing Rules, beginning in spring of 2015, in order to keep in place, the 2015 Moderator and Vice Moderator (an action which was barely defeated) and failed to nominate a Vice Moderator Elect until the November meeting at which he/she assumes the post of Vice Moderator.
- There appears to be undue influence by the Personnel committee over matters to come before the presbytery.
- Stewardship & Mission Interpretation Committee, which, under our Standing Rules, is charged with creating our budget annually, failed to create a budget for 2016, devolving the process to a working group of Council. A deficit budget was proposed and passed with the proviso that Presbytery Council return with a balanced budget proposal during the calendar year. Again, this was done as a working group of Presbytery Council, not by the committee designated under the Standing Rules.
- There have been concerns expressed by members of the presbytery that it no longer feels “safe” to share views and opinions for fear of ridicule, embarrassment, harassment, or bullying, a situation which is apparently not being addressed by the governing Council.

The final paragraph stated, “Perhaps, in short, there appears to be happening in our presbytery what is happening in society in general: a disregard for open and fair discussion, a lack of space in which we treat one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, recognizing that siblings of course will disagree, but should not be offensive and denigrating in doing so, and a systemic toxicity which is (or should be) anathema to a body of PCUSA which works toward fulfillment of the Great Ends of the Church. It saddens us to take this step, but as it does not appear that we are capable of addressing these and related problems internally, we humbly request Synod intervention in the form of a Special Administrative Review.”

The Synod’s Special Administrative Review falls under G-3.0108b – Special Administrative Review and not under G-3.0108a – General Administrative Review that your letter mentions. I assume you saw my October 10th letter to Albany Presbytery Stated Clerk, Dan Rogers, that provided the charge to the SARC as follows: *The SARC, a committee of the Synod of the Northeast, will operate under the following charge:*

The SARC shall have the authority to review operations and procedures at the Albany Presbytery that include but are not limited to:

- *Minutes of Presbytery meetings*

- *Minutes of the Presbytery Council, Presbytery committees, commissions, and task forces or working groups created for a particular reason*
- *Written policies and procedures including but not limited to Presbytery By-Laws, Presbytery Standing Rules, and the Presbytery Manual of Administrative Operations*
- *Standard practices of the Presbytery, its Council and its committees, commissions, and task forces or working groups that may or may not have an actual written policy or procedure related to them*
- *Financial documents including Presbytery budgets*

In its review function the SARC shall have the authority to interview presbyters, staff, contractors and other concerned parties as well as request any other documents relevant to this review.

The SARC did not expand its work once it began. This charge is comprehensive in its nature with the intention of doing a review that can provide the presbytery with constructive recommendations designed to help improve its systems and the way people work together.

The opportunity for a special administrative review is very different from the judicial proceedings of either a remedial complaint or a disciplinary complaint. There is no formal complaint here that is going through the steps of the judicial process. Instead, the letter expresses concern about systemic irregularities that, if found to be consistent with a number of peoples' concerns, would benefit the presbytery to make appropriate changes. The assurance of confidentiality came about because of the concern expressed in the letter to the Synod as well as comments to the SARC that there may be retaliation against people who speak out.

The fear of retaliation is real. The SARC had to create a space in which people feel safe to share their observations. However, there is a difference between maintaining confidentiality for those who fear retaliation or harassment and swearing people to secrecy. I do not believe the SARC has sworn anyone to secrecy as there is no reason nor benefit to this. Providing confidentiality to people who fear retaliation is a far cry from your statement that the SARC is turning an inquiry into an inquisition. Anyone who does not feel the need to have their discussion remain confidential can let the SARC know this just as you have indicated in your letter that this is the approach you will take. The findings of the SARC and the recommendations will not be secret, nor will they be confidential. They will be public for all in the presbytery to read, consider and discuss.

While one can never know that true reasoning behind a person's action, the letter requesting a special administrative review and subsequent discussions have never indicated that the request was born out of revenge or harassment but out of a love for the church and a desire to see Albany Presbytery function in healthier ways.

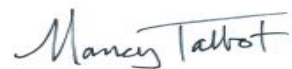
The issue of the anonymous and vicious emails has now spread to the SARC and to me. Neither the SARC nor I will respond to anonymous emails, calls or documents. This person's behavior appears extreme and outside of any behavior we have experienced in the past during the work of a SARC. The suspicion and mistrust were present in the presbytery before the Synod received the request for a special administrative review. This person appears to be capitalizing on the existence of the SARC to spread his/her word to a larger platform, but the SARC is not empowering anonymous complaints.

I must say that I am a bit surprised by the tone of your letter. The Synod has created SARCs in a couple of other presbyteries with virtually the same SARC charge and has not received the negative comments about the SARC, the resistance or the implied threats that seem apparent here. There has been a spirit of cooperation with the SARC that has enabled it to do its work well.

The role of the SARC is to provide recommendations that can help a presbytery become healthier in its practices. It is not an inquisition as you state, nor is the SARC out to get any one person or any group within the presbytery. It has been created to do a review of the systems that exist through documents mentioned as well as through interviews as the SARC keeps in mind the alleged concerns initially provided them. They will do so with transparency and will be as open as possible during the process but will need to maintain confidentiality for those who feel unsafe. The SARC will also work as expediently as possible. At this time no one knows how long this process will take, but hopefully it will not extend to a year.

We have identified gifted members of other presbyteries who are willing to provide their time and talents to assess Albany Presbytery and provide constructive recommendations that can be helpful to your presbytery. We hope that you will receive this effort with the good will in which it is intended. I encourage any or all of you to speak with the SARC so that your voices are included.

Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Nancy Talbot".

Rev. Nancy Talbot
Synod Stated Clerk