

Webinar: A Proposed New Structure for Albany Presbytery August 31, 2016

Participants:

First Name	Last Name	Church/Worshipping Community/Organization
Laurie	Bargstedt	United Presbyterian Church in Amsterdam
Donna	Bowers	New Castle Presbytery Planning Team
Lynn	Brown	St Peter's Spencertown
Tim	Coombs	Albany Presbytery
Terry	Diggory	Saratoga Springs
Kevin	Dwyer	New Scotland
Lynne	Hardy	Presbyterian United Church of Schaghticoke, NY
Earl	Johnson	HR
Kate	Kotfila	Cambridge UPC
Louise	LaPoint	First United Presbyterian Church
Laura	Mitchell	West Hebron United Presbyterian Church
Bonnie	Orth	Mayfield Presbyterian
Carol	Plue	Christ's Church of the Hills
Rebecca	Putman	Northville
Paul	Randall	parish associate, Westminster
Martha	Reisner	Westminster Presbyterian, Albany; CRTC
Laura	Rogers	FUPC Troy, COM
Daniel	Rogers	Albany Presbytery
Susan	Schell	Westminster Presbyterian
Jennifer	Schoenfisch	Albany Presbytery
Elizabeth	Shen O'Connor	Brunswick Church
Susan	Strang	Christ's Church of the Hills
Elaine	Woroby	Loudonville Presbyterian Church
Jenny	Warren	New Castle Presbytery
Barbara	Wheeler	United Church, Granville
Lois Ann	Wolff	Committee on Ministry

Comments typed in during the Webinar:

Laura Mitchell

West Hebron United Presbyterian Church

What is the evidence of the "low level of trust"?

Post-webinar comments/questions/feedback

Laura Rogers

FUPC, Troy

Dear Friends,

These are comments and feedback rather than questions.

Many thanks for all the thought and care that has gone into this proposal. And for the numerous ways in which there has been communication with the presbytery throughout the process.

I appreciated Barbara Wheeler's statement that the staffing group had participated with the structure group in developing the proposed new structure. From the stand point of my involvement on COM I have experienced an increase in the amount of work directed to COM as a result of the change in the job description of the Transitional Presbyter. Two simple examples: 1) Exit interviews -- previously they were managed by the General Presbyter. Currently COM has that responsibility --- this spring there have been three. 2) In her term with Albany Presbytery Shannan has provided important and excellent care to pastors as needed, however COM has had the responsibility of forming a "Pastoral Care Team" in order to be attentive to needs. Both of these require recruiting, coordinating and implementation. Those are just two examples of how the specific work of COM has been impacted by the staffing change. I do not anticipate that additional staffing will occur in the future, but that the current level will be, at the most, what will provide guidance for the ministry of the presbytery.

As a result, I am very appreciative of the proposed plan for changes in the structure. As I look at the descriptions of the committees there are a number which assume, based on their titles and descriptions, responsibility for what is now COM's work -- Congregational Support, Committee on Church Development and even Committee on Church Mission. Congregational Support correlates most closely and completely with the current work of COM, but the others pull out some functions consistent with their titles, which will make for greater clarity and focus on the part of the committees. I note that the three proposed committees named here

recommend a total membership of 36 -- a huge asset to accomplishing the work -- if recruiting can be successful!

And this does not speak to the scope of the additional work of the presbytery as outlined in each of the committee descriptions.

Again, my deep appreciation for all the energy, intelligence, imagination and love which went into this document.

Blessings,

Laura

Response to Laura Rogers

Dear Laura,

Thank you for your comments on the proposed changes to the Presbytery structure. All of us are aware of the workload carried by COM in its current configuration. We are also aware of the "baggage" that is attached to the name. The proposed changes do attempt to address both of these concerns. The work of COM is divided among a couple of new committees in the hope that more attention can be given to those assigned tasks. Using the Form of Government as our guide, the assigned tasks are very specific and more limited in scope. We also hope that by giving the committees some commission authority that the workload will be less cumbersome. Again, thank you for your helpful comments.

Grace & Peace,

Jerry

for the Webinar panelists

Susan Strang

Christ's Church of the Hills

Susan asked Shannan to repeat the first part of her answer on the evidence of lack of trust in the Presbytery. The sound cut out during the webinar.

Response to Susan

Susan,

Thank you for your question.

The "evidence" for this issue has come to us in a few forms.

The HolyCow survey that we did in late 2015 showed a significant lack of trust in the Presbytery. That survey does not specify exactly what is causing it but points us to an issue to investigate. We have also heard in an ongoing way from congregations that for various reasons struggle in their relationship with the Presbytery and also from clergy who also struggle. These have various issue reasons attached to them.

There are also some historic issues of leadership of the Presbytery and concerns that were raised there, and so we have been working as a Council to address them.

The Holy Cow survey showed that the more involved someone said they were in the Presbytery the less trust was an issue for them showing that integration, involvement and buy-in are key ways of healing this issue.

I hope this helps. Please let me know if you have any other questions, we will be putting out an e-news about this topic tomorrow and also highlighting the conversations that will be held around the Presbytery the next two weeks related to this and building an open and transparent system.

Peace,

Shannan

Jim Miller

HR Teaching Elder – Member At Large

A voice from the past: Reflections by Jim Miller

I have listened with considerable curiosity to most of the webinars provided by the Presbytery as you seek to find a new way forward. Obviously the Webinar approach is beyond my pay grade in how you make it happen, but it does show a serious attempt to stay up with the times. In my tenure I introduced computers to the Presbytery office beginning with a terrific 10 megabyte IBM

– you read that right. I needed to take a course at SUNY to learn what computers could do. When I retired, the big question was how much cell phone charges Presbytery should pay for when COM leaders started submitting their bills. Those were the dark ages compared to life today.

What follows are some observations from a resident of the dark ages which are not meant to be critical, but simply observational. You can draw from them whatever conclusions you choose. My days of having an axe to grind are long past, but I do have a continuing interest in what was my first career.

Webinars: Having listened to 3 or 4 of these one of the great surprises has been that the participants are all folks whom were active 20 years ago before I retired. The most recent one: Terry Diggory, Earl Johnson, Paul Randall, Cate Kotfila, Jerry McKinney, Barbara Wheeler, Cara Molyneaux, Kevin Dwyer, etc. An impressive group, but where are the new folks?

A concern I heard expressed related to getting new Presbyters (a term I prefer to Minister of the Word or T.E. or R.E.) involved deserves a high priority. In times past much of this occurred by placing newcomers on Committees – the last structure change eliminated many committees and this resulted in an unintended by-product of eliminating one of the connection points for new clergy and laity as well.

A second concern with which I resonated strongly was the bi-furcation of fellowship and business meetings proposed in the new structure. When I joined the Presbytery in 1961, you were required to apply for early dismissal with the Stated Clerk if you planned to leave before the end of the meeting and these early dismissals were voted on by the whole Presbytery with the reason stated for why you had to leave early. This had fallen by the wayside by the time I became E.P. and Joan and I often referred to the Presbytery meetings as like an “open house” when folks came and stayed for as long as they were interested. We learned that the development of the docket has a lot to do with when folks came and went – worship was a component of this, but interestingly in my early days when attendance was mandatory, worship beyond opening and closing prayers was only once a year – Communion at Silver Bay. Clearly, it is a much stronger draw now.

The third concern I heard expressed again and again was about “trust” or “loss of trust.” This is the issue I would like to speak to most directly, and which I hope you will hear in the spirit it is given. Again a 55 year familiarity with the Presbytery should carry some weight. When I arrived I began my journey on the National Missions Committee (in essence the church strategy

committee which was responsible for starting new churches and closing others.) Prior to my arrival, the committee had established some clear guidelines about church size and pastoral leadership – these were in a nutshell. You needed 1000 members plus to justify 2 pastors, and at least 250 members to have a full-time pastor. Fifteen years later when I returned to Albany as E.P. this was still one of the most contentious issues I had to face.

I went to Washington County and met with representatives of all the churches there (11 or more) and declared that this was no longer an operative principle – that we were going to focus on co-operation among churches rather than church size, and that I was committed to keeping all of these churches open for as long as they chose to be so. Slowly, “trust” got re-established and I heard senior elders telling others what I had said and they believed me. Subsequently, in the two decades I served no church was closed except as a voluntary merger or a voluntary choice to close out its existence. One exception – the Malta church was closed, but permitted to continue as a non-Presbyterian church until we decided to make it a new church development site

My guess, and this is an educated guess, that the “trust” issue now presenting itself in the Presbytery has to do with a fear that the Presbytery is going to close down churches against their will. I believe the Presbytery has developed some guidelines relating to buildings and church sustainability and if my experience from the past has any relevance, these have created much greater anxiety and loss of trust than was intended.

Another interesting observation – I first encountered the Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church more than half a century ago when I heard such figures as Eugene Carson Blake, Bishop Pike, and Norman Thomas preach there. Forty years ago I began preaching there by invitation once every other summer – the congregation had dwindled to 15 or 20 members. It was one of the one or two smallest churches in the Presbytery, and only held services for 2 months in the summer. Today, it is still only holding summer services but its membership has grown and it is a vital congregation with a weekly on-line news report. It also has served its community in some very special ways such as buying with Presbytery’s help a building the church now desires to give to a community organization as a community center. Barbara Dudley, a former Chair of the Presbytery Trustees, was instrumental in making all this happen.

Which leads me to my final observation and in this case I will acknowledge that I have a bias. My greatest contribution to Albany Presbytery was my role in working with the Trustees. When I arrived the Presbytery had an endowment of \$275,000 to which nothing had been added over many years. It also had fully depleted its mission fund and in fact owed money on debts relating

to Meikleknex and Hebron. The balance in all other accounts was about \$60,000. I insisted upon taking the management of the endowment funds away from a bank, and with Barbara Dudley's help along with First Albany Corporation we found new managers and began to build the endowment. In my 20 years we added \$50,000/ year through investment gains and judicious decisions about the proceeds from sales of buildings and becoming our own lending source to our churches, so that when I left the endowments had increased by over \$1million and no church had any mortgages outstanding. Both Hebron and Meikleknex had balances exceeding \$100,000.

So the only advice I am offering is be careful when you turn over management of most funds to a budget committee which always has a short-term focus; and take responsibility for the long-term away from the Trustees. My commitment was always for the long-term which was never popular with those who wanted to spend it now. Without the endowments held by half a dozen of the Presbytery's churches, the Presbytery would see its shared mission support cut in half or more – I still follow the numbers.

A penultimate thought: seek to find more ways for clergy to interact with each other in face to face settings – my guess is that serving as a pastor has become an increasingly lonely endeavor because of less interaction with others who serve in a similar capacity. I am too far removed to know the best way to make this happen today. In my era it was our common commitment to local mission – we knew we couldn't make a difference alone and so we had to work together.

Response to Jim

Dear Jim,

I want to thank you for taking the time both to participate in the webinars and to respond to the proposed new structure plan.

Our use of webinars is an attempt to “stay up with the times.” In addition to the webinars, we have been developing an intentional communication plan that uses many of the new tools that are now available. And you & I are examples of how it is possible for “old dogs” to learn “new tricks.”

The first concern you raise is participation. During our transition discussions this has been a recurring issue. Attendance at Presbytery meetings has declined over the last several years,

both on the part of our continuing members and the ruling elder commissioners from congregations. In addition, the Nominating Committee has struggled to fill positions on our current committees. We definitely need to work on developing a “culture of participation” among the members of the Presbytery.

We have been fortunate to have the participation of many of our newer and younger teaching elders. Although they may not have spoken on the webinars, they have spoken at Presbytery meetings, and they are participating in committees of the Presbytery. We have also had participation by new ruling elders and other non-clergy members of the Presbytery. We still have work to do, and as we move forward we will need to attend to the level of participation by teaching elders and congregations.

Your second concern was the “bifurcation of fellowship and business meetings.” The Council discussed this concern at our September meeting and realized that this needed to be clarified. One of the modifications to the “final” proposal that will come to the October 1st Presbytery meeting says that the Presbytery will meet “three times per year for business and two times per year for education and spiritual growth.” The Council wants to make it clear that worship and fellowship will be a part of all meetings of the Presbytery.

The third concern you raise is the level of trust in the Presbytery. The report we received from the “Holy Cow” instrument indicated that a low trust level existed and needed to be explored. That resonated with members of the Presbytery Council, and we engaged in discussions of the issue, facilitated by Jim Fennimore from the Samaritan Counseling Center. During the webinar there were a couple of questions raised about the indications of this low trust level. I certainly don’t think that this is a universal experience within the Presbytery. However, in this time of high anxiety within congregations and low levels of trust for institutions of all kinds in our society generally it should not come as a surprise to us that we have some “trust issues” within our common life.

No doubt there are a number of sources for our trust issues. Some of them are related to past history, and some of them are related to current realities. You point out an on-going source of anxiety and mistrust for the Presbytery within congregations—the fear that the Presbytery will close them against their will. During our transition conversations, it has become clear that the Presbytery must be more focused on supporting the ministry and mission of our congregations and on assisting them in discerning a faithful future. We want to find a way together to balance

“fiduciary responsibility” and “missional faithfulness.” Your example of stating clearly that the Presbytery will not close a congregation against its will is helpful. As you learned, it certainly helps to lower the anxiety level, and that will help built up trust.

Your final concern—the management of the Presbytery’s financial resources—is also being discussed. At the October 1st meeting, some critical questions will be raised in the context of the budget discussion. As you know, there are some differences of opinion about the use of “accrued funds.” There is also concern about Presbytery’s “per capita.” We have wrestled with these questions over the last two years, and we will continue to work through them. The Council decided not to merge the Budget & Finance Committee with the Board of Trustees. The Council did add language to the responsibilities of both groups requiring that they consult and coordinate with each other concerning financial issues impacting the Presbytery budget. These questions will be ongoing as expenses increase and financial resources are stretched.

As you mentioned in your last paragraph, it is critical for us to build community—among teaching elders and among congregations. The *Book of Order* reminds us that no structure can function properly with trust and love. We hope that by identifying this need we will be able to work together to make it so.

Again, thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts and reflections with us. I’m sorry that we were not able to respond to you in a timelier way. That responsibility was given to me, and I have had some frustrating e-mail experiences over the last two weeks, causing a delay.

Many thanks for your ministry among us.

Grace & Peace,

Jerry

Terry Diggory

PNECC – Saratoga Springs

[Underlined topics are response form categories]

Meeting schedule

As discussed in webinar, the separation of business and fellowship into separate Presbytery meetings raises a number of concerns, including: misleading separation of tasks; division of Presbytery community into separate interest groups, including one group that gets “educated” on the issue and a different group that votes on the issue; time gaps between opportunities for business and the potential need for more (not fewer) special meetings; diminished opportunity to approach business in the spirit of worship. Without changing the overall goal, the proposal might be modified to specify five meetings a year, with three emphasizing business and two emphasizing fellowship. This would still allow for both functions at each meeting (in differing proportions), as necessary; ultimate control would be exercised by approval of the docket at the beginning of each meeting.

Committees etc

- Good to encourage inclusion of non-ordained laypeople.
- Good to “commission” powers to COM spinoffs and Trustees.
- Which of the new COM spinoffs will work with congregations during search for new pastor?
This is an important function that should be specified.

Coordination Committee

The proposed membership for this committee is the same as that of the “Executive Committee” defined in the current Standing Rules. This should be noted for the sake of clarity.

Committee on Representation and Nomination

The present Committee on Nominations (of which I am a member) discussed the possibility of combining functions with COR; as I heard the discussion, the possibility was not viewed favorably on the whole. The task of expanding representation is potentially much broader. Combining with the task of nominations is likely to limit concern with representation to a matter of who serves on committees.

Anything Else

- This proposal does not recommend any staff changes. Is that question off the table or will it be coming out of a separate task force?

-- Regarding process: the contemplated changes will require amendment of the Standing Rules (Manual of Administrative Operations). The final proposal should be presented formally as a set of amendments (or replacement) and should follow the procedures for amendment stipulated in the Standing Rules.

Response to Terry

Dear Terry,

Thank you for your participation in the structure webinar and for your questions.

At our September meeting, the Presbytery Council discussed the concerns raised about the change in the Presbytery meeting schedule. First, the Council realized that we need to make it clear that both worship & fellowship will be a part of all Presbytery meetings. Second, the Presbytery will be able to take up business items at the two other meetings.

The reason for the change to our current schedule of meetings is that what we are currently doing is not working. Attendance at Presbytery meetings has steadily declined over the last few years. We have received feedback indicating frustration with the length of meetings and with cramming too much stuff into too little time. Also, we have struggled to schedule meetings so that more ruling elders can attend.

Our hope is that by allowing committees to handle regular business with “commission powers” we will be able to focus on critical business in the three meetings. Our intention is to use some of our communication tools to provide more information ahead of the business meetings—like the webinars—so that there can be greater discussion before we meet. We hope this schedule will allow for more flexibility in scheduling, greater participation in decision-making, and growth as a community of trust and love.

The **Committee on Teaching Elders and Congregations** is given the responsibility to “facilitate relationships between congregations and Teaching Elders and Commissioned Ruling Elders.” This would include the search for a new pastor. Your question indicates that this needs to be clearer.

We do realize that creating a **Committee on Representation & Nominations** will present a challenge. Our hope is that by putting these two critical functions together we might create a new energy around this work.

The Presbytery Council decided to put the staffing question last on the timeline, after we have made other decisions—particularly structure and finances/budget. The Structure Proposal does not require any particular staffing model, but it does hold up some of the needs we have heard expressed during our transition conversations (support for congregations, eg.). The Staff & Structure Team has done research on staffing models, and it is prepared to move forward as soon as we are ready.

Dan Rogers and I have been in conversation about the proper procedures for adopting a new structure. The proposal presents a replacement structure, and if adopted, will require changes to some of our standing rules and a revision to our Manual of Operations. We will do our best to handle this “decently and in good order.”

Again, thank you for your questions and your faithful service.

Grace & Peace,

Jerry

Google Feedback for A Proposed New Structure for Albany Presbytery

I am a:

Ruling Elder

Teaching Elder, Retired

Ruling Elder

Ruling Elder

I am associated with the following ministry in the Presbytery:

Elder of Administration

Committee on Ministry; Moderating Bay Road session, pulpit supply (By the way, because one is retired doesn't mean one isn't active!)

Personnel and Peacemaking. Also two Company of Elders groups.

Committee on Nominations; Triennial Visit Task Force; PNECC Saratoga Springs.

My name is:

Frank Sears

Lois Ann Wolff

Paul Randall

Terry Diggory

Do you have any questions or feedback or ideas related to the purpose statement?

Suggest that a stronger effort be placed in the area of developing CRE's.

I'm not sure what a) means: "governing" needs unpacking; could be anything from true democracy to a dictatorship.

While I like the freshness of the proposed new structure and see some creative new possibilities, maybe a key question to start with is: HOW IS THE NEW STRUCTURE NOT A RE-SHUFFLING OF THE DECK CHAIRS?

Do you have any questions or feedback or ideas related to the proposed meeting schedule?

NO

I would have to see this in action, since I can picture that some people would only come for business meetings and some only for worship/fellowship/education. Also, I believe strongly that worship should be a component of every presbytery meeting. As a member of presbytery and not a member of a particular congregation, presbytery IS my congregation, and worship is the most important activity we do together.

I like the proposed meeting schedule as long as the two fellowship-worship-education meetings are really well-designed and dynamic.

As discussed in webinar, the separation of business and fellowship into separate Presbytery meetings raises a number of concerns, including: misleading separation of tasks; division of Presbytery community into separate interest groups, including one group that gets “educated” on the issue and a different group that votes on the issue; time gaps between opportunities for business and the potential need for more (not fewer) special meetings; diminished opportunity to approach business in the spirit of worship. Without changing the overall goal, the proposal might be modified to specify five meetings a year, with three emphasizing business and two emphasizing fellowship. This would still allow for both functions at each meeting (in differing proportions), as necessary; ultimate control would be exercised by approval of the docket at the beginning of each meeting.

Do you have any questions or feedback or ideas related to the proposed committees, boards and commissions?

NO

--Good to encourage inclusion of non-ordained laypeople.

--Good to “commission” powers to COM spinoffs and Trustees.

--Which of the new COM spinoffs will work with congregations during search for new pastor?

This is an important function that should

Do you have any questions or feedback or ideas related to the proposed coordination committee?

NO

It seems to me that this committee would take the place of presbytery council, and as such the setting of the agenda for presbytery meetings would be in the hands of very few. This

idea seems destined to make the lack of trust in presbytery worse, not better.

The proposed membership for this committee is the same as that of the “Executive Committee” defined in the current Standing Rules. This should be noted for the sake of clarity.

Do you have any questions or feedback or ideas related to the proposed committee on representation and nomination?

YES: Diversity in Presbytery Leadership should align with biblical teaching and acceptance.

No.

The present Committee on Nominations (of which I am a member) discussed the possibility of combining functions with COR; as I heard the discussion, the possibility was not viewed favorably on the whole. The task of expanding representation is potentially much broader. Combining with the task of nominations is likely to limit concern with representation to a matter of who serves on committees.

Do you have any questions or feedback or ideas related to the proposed committee on budget and finance?

NO

No.

Do you have any questions or feedback or ideas related to the proposed committee on personnel?

NO

Not on the committee or its responsibilities. However, nowhere in this proposed structure is there any provision for specific responsibilities for staff, no idea how many staff or whether full-time, part-time, or contract employees. Some professional staff (beyond the stated clerk, still provided by the Book of Order) is desirable, but in what configuration?

Do you have any questions or feedback or ideas related to the proposed board of trustees?

NO

No.

Do you have any questions or feedback or ideas related to the proposed PJC? (note, these requirements are constitutional)

NO

No.

Do you have any questions or feedback or ideas related to the proposed committee on teaching elders and congregations?

NO

Most of this committee's responsibilities and commission are now within the work of COM. However, unless I have missed something, there is no provision anywhere for those working hand in hand with sessions or pastor nominating committees of churches in transition. This is one of the most important responsibilities of presbytery to constituent congregations, and can often be utilized to aid a congregation in calling the right pastor at the right time.

It looks like some of the functions are in the current COM and other current COM functions are in the new Development and Mission committee. Will anything be lost if these two groups aren't talking to each other, or have they essentially been separated anyway in the current COM?

Do you have any questions or feedback or ideas related to the proposed committee on leadership development?

YES: Promote the growth of CRE's.

This committee would take the place of the Committee on Preparation for Ministry. At least as important, however, would be the last of the responsibilities, to help develop and implement plans for growth in leadership of those who are already serving or about to serve the presbytery. This committee could also be the communication hub for information about opportunities for leadership growth outside the presbytery.

I like especially the Leadership Development component.

Do you have any questions or feedback or ideas related to the proposed committee on development and mission?

NO

Perhaps what I was looking for regarding working with PNCs of congregations in transition might be what is meant (at least in part) by the responsibility to "support congregations in the work of transformation, revitalization, and transition" but I think it needs to be more specific. The work with PNCs is that important!

Do you have any questions or feedback or ideas related to the review provisions?

NO

Obviously, informal review will be happening from day one. There ought to be enough flexibility in the review process so that where there are serious problems, they ought to be addressed before three years go by. It does take a while for us to "live into" a new structure, but flexibility is almost always a good idea.

Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

Promote growth of CRE's enabling smaller, rural churches the opportunity to keep their doors open.

You have done a thorough job! Thank you for the very hard work!

--This proposal does not recommend any staff changes. Is that question off the table or will it be coming out of a separate task force?

-- Regarding process: the contemplated changes will require amendment of the Standing Rules (Manual of Administrative