

Proposal for the Development of a Missional Urban Ministry Process

Presbytery of Philadelphia
December, 2008

History

The Presbytery of Philadelphia, in its current configuration, dates from 1943 where “67 churches from the former Presbytery of Philadelphia, 80 churches from the former Presbytery of Philadelphia North, and 29 churches from the former Presbytery of Chester were united for mission.”¹ The new Presbytery was established in such a way as to support the ministry of Presbyterians in the urban setting of metro-Philadelphia. The inclusion of the “main-line” churches (among others) was to assure an adequate resource base (both financial and personal) to the united presbytery that was coming into the being. A major element of the structure of that new presbytery was the Metropolitan Ministry Committee.

This merger of urban and suburban congregations into one Presbytery was the fruit of a dream that by “unifying and centralizing of the Presbyterian forces and resources of Philadelphia and suburbs...to enter upon an aggressive, thorough-going, statesmanlike program of City Mission and Church Extension.”²

The results were not what the framers of this union had hoped for. They had no way of knowing that the war would put on hold their plans for several long years nor could they have foreseen the mass exodus of Presbyterians from the city in the heady days of the post-war era. Nevertheless, when the dust settled some significant accomplishments could be claimed. New church developments were greatly aided by the foresight to purchase land where new developments had not yet been built, but were soon to come. The combined Presbytery founded “25 new churches between 1943 and 1989; six in the city; eight in Bucks County; seven in Montgomery County; and four in Delaware County. These included five new congregations developed by the former United Presbyterian Church of North America (UPNA)... Of the six new congregations in the city, two were Black, two Korean and one Japanese.”³ In the same period three congregations moved from the city to the suburbs.

Hammonds goes on to report (*Potent Witness*, 57) that

“The expectation that the union of the Presbyteries and the sharing of their resources would help to strengthen falter city congregations and arrest their decline was not realized. In 1943, the 52,000 city church members of the new Presbytery represented 62 percent of its constituency. In 1988, the 15,101 members reported by 71 city churches were only 25

¹ Rankin, Walton and Kenneth A. Hammonds, “Reorganizing for Mission” in G. Hall Todd, editor, *Potent Witness: A History of the Presbytery of Philadelphia*, Philadelphia, Presbytery of Philadelphia, 1956 revised 1989, page 54.

² *Potent Witness*, p 54.

³ *Potent Witness*, p 55

percent of the total. During this period, enrollment in the Sunday church schools dropped from 31,000 to 4,241. Between 1944 and 1988, 26 city churches were dissolved, all but two at their own request.

“A major reason for this steady membership loss in city congregations was the movement of many Presbyterians to the suburbs, and the inability of those who remained to minister effectively in the midst of racial and economic change in their neighborhoods. Some who moved to the suburbs returned to their city churches and continued their leadership and financial commitments, but most united with congregations in their new communities. So the responsibility for meeting the demands of ministry in the face of racial and cultural and economic change, together with the financial burden of maintaining large, aging buildings, was laid on the relatively few who remained. Many of them were older persons living on fixed incomes who could not afford to move out of the city and whose financial resources and energies were not equal to these demands.”

Faced with declining congregations in many parts of the city and closed churches in several others, the Presbytery sought to remain engaged in the cities (including Chester and Norristown along with Philadelphia) through several creative ministries. Closed churches were remade into ministry centers (Chester Eastside Ministries and John Gloucester House). Several struggling churches found new support as hosts of the Presbytery’s Head Start Learning Tree. Various parish approaches were tried. Support of the ministry of remaining urban congregations was made through three financial campaigns that together yielded \$4.5 million – 40% of which was dedicated to urban ministry.⁴

We do not have a formal history of the years following 1989 but many present will recall those years. From what I have learned the focus of urban ministry by the Presbytery over the past twenty years has been 1) financial support of urban congregations through grants, 2) ministries of compassion through the two “outreach ministries” of John Gloucester House and Chester Eastside Ministries as well as support of food pantries operated by many urban congregations, and 3) the Head Start Learning Tree. Various committees have also kept social justice issues before the Presbytery in an effort to sway public opinion or achieve public policy change. The Hunger Action Enabler has been at the forefront of this effort, particularly around food and employment issues.

Yet as Hammonds noted above, the inability of the Presbytery (an in fact, of any “main-line” denomination) to affect the life of city in any meaningful way was severely limited by the massive outflow of Presbyterians from the city into the suburbs in the post-war era and the radical change taking place in neighborhoods ever since. It may well be that the vision we have cherished over the years of remaking the city of man into the city of God was far too ambitious and will have to be given up.

⁴ *Potent Witness*, p 58

Yet those of us who are convinced that God loves the city too cannot simply walk away from it. That is why so many members who grew up in local congregations faithfully return there each week to worship and continue to support its ministry. That is why individuals and congregations and the Presbytery as a whole support the significant work being done at John Gloucester House and Chester Eastside Ministry and through the Head Start Learning Tree. That is why individual congregations continue to reach out in their own neighborhoods to people who are not likely to come in to worship with them. And that is why other congregations continue to support them in this vital ministry.

Signs of Change

Nonetheless it is clear to all that the vision of making a large impact on the urban landscape has eluded even the best minds in public, private and religious life. Although the community ministries make a real impact on the lives of those they minister to, they are only a fraction of those in need of such services in those communities and even these necessary services do not fully make up for the loss of a vital, worshipping congregation in the community. Where Presbyterian congregations still exist in our urban communities, they do offer a redemptive presence to some of those around them, but all too often these congregations are so consumed with their own struggle to survive that they are unable to address the communities around them with anything more than occasional services.

If then, the existing congregations are unable to face the demands of a vital urban ministry in their current configuration, and if the community outreach centers which replaced some of them in urban communities cannot address the needs of community and well-being their neighbors need, and if neither our existing churches nor our recycled outreach centers are particularly effective at making disciples for Jesus Christ, and if we are at a loss as to how to address the systemic and structural problems that define the urban context, then what should we do now? The Presbytery has been addressing that question for the greatest part of this decade.

On October 28, 2003 a Presbytery-wide conversation was held at Children's Village where a cross-section of the leadership of the Presbytery engaged in a forced choice process to set priorities for Presbytery budget making. In order of highest funding priority the results were:

- Congregational Revitalization (Church Assistance)42%
- Building Healthy Communities (Com. Ministries)32%
- Personnel Budget for Presbytery Staff17%
- Presbytery Subsidy for Kirkwood Camp9%

Two weeks later the Council repeated the process and arrived at very similar results:

	<u>Individuals</u>	<u>Small Groups</u>
• Congregational Revitalization (Church Assistance).....	28%.....	36%
• Building Healthy Communities (Com. Ministries).....	29%.....	29%
• Personnel Budget for Presbytery Staff	18%.....	19%
• Items funded by restricted funds (added for Council). 16%.....	16%.....	12%
• Presbytery Subsidy for Kirkwood Camp	9%.....	5%

Since then the Presbytery’s budget has reflected these priorities giving about one-third of the general mission budget to community ministries and about one-fifth to congregational ministry. In addition the Trustees each year provide a number of urban congregations with significant assistance to maintain the safety and integrity of their aging buildings.

The budget consultations of 2003 were only a part of a growing consensus across the Presbytery about the future of its combined witness in the metro-Philadelphia area. In the early part of this decade two other groups were hard at work thinking about how to be faithful to God’s mission. They were, of course, the Planning Team commissioned to design a new structure for the Presbytery and the Urban Ministry Task Force. Both groups took their responsibilities seriously and engaged in a great deal of prayer, research, listening to others, and design.

In early 2004, the General Council of the Presbytery created an **Urban Ministry Task Force**. Their work overlapped with the work of the Council’s own **Planning Committee** which was charged with drafting a new “missional” plan for the Presbytery. The two groups worked alongside each other until the Urban Ministry Task Force was ready to report and the Planning Committee was still working on their document. The Council then asked the Planning Committee to incorporate elements of the Urban Ministry Task Force into their planning process. The result was that (in addition to a Laboratory for Urban Ministry) a Racial-Ethnic Ministry Leadership Development Center was added to the Plan’s goal of “Develop[ing] church leadership to serve congregations [by] develop[ing] a curriculum for pastors, elders, deacons and teachers, including the basic principles of church leadership, which is contextually relevant to the 21st century and our situation in Philadelphia”⁵; creating the appearance of calling for two separate leadership development tracts within the Presbytery.

During this same time period the Presbytery engaged the services of consultants to work with a group of congregations in West Philadelphia that became known as the “**West Philly Five**”. After many months of conversations, the hard work of consultants, and various efforts to work together around areas of common interest such as music and youth ministry, the effort fell apart, it seems, over the inability of the leaders to allow old identities to go in order to reach out for something new – no matter how vibrant or vital that new creation might have appeared. Soon after the collapse of the West Philly Five effort one of

⁵ Missional Plan Goal 5, referred to as “Seminary Without Walls” in implementation steps listed on the last page of the plan.

the congregations, Reeve Memorial, voted to close its doors. Its building, the only existing building in the Presbytery build by and for African Americans, is now home to the Women's Empowerment Initiative.

In 2006 (shortly after the *Missional Plan* was approved) the Rev. Nancy Muth led a group of congregations and pastors in the creation of the **Philadelphia Urban Ministry Institute (PUMI)** which saw itself (at least in part) as the Seminary Without Walls called for in the Missional Plan of 2005. Over the years since then PUMI has sponsored a number of workshops and training events including a yearly 'pilgrimage' to visit key urban ministry locations in Washington, DC. PUMI has also worked closely with the Christian Community Development Association, the Campolo School of Social Change, and the City of God conference.

In 2008 the General Assembly adopted the *African American Church Growth Strategy* report and sent it to presbyteries and synods as a way of helping them to work to achieve the goals of the *1998 Racial Ethnic Immigrant Evangelism Church Growth Strategy*.

Present Situation

In implementing the *Missional Plan*, the Presbytery has adapted a number of the features of the *Plan* to the urban context. To date the two key ones are the Partnership for Missional Church (PMC) and the Mission Action Networks (MANs).

As part of the implementation of the *Missional Plan*, the Committee on Mission Oversight (COMO) adopted the proposal of the Congregational Strategy Team and the Presbytery Staff to enter into a contract with Church Innovations to lead a **Partnership for Missional Church** process within the Presbytery. This venture was partially funded by the Synod of the Trinity which highly endorsed it.

The Partnership for Missional Church takes as its base assumption that God is at work in the world and that the Church is created to be God's mission to that world. The process of the Partnership for Missional Church is one of spiritual discernment of what "in heaven's name" God is doing around the congregation and what group or people God is drawing them toward as this body of Christ's church. Discoveries made by teams within the congregation are tested over the next couple of years as experiments are run involving putting members of the congregation in touch with the group or people that God seems to be leading the congregation to embrace. Entered into fully, this process has great potential for reconnecting congregations to their neighborhoods. Fully one-quarter of the congregations engaged in the PMC process are located in urban contexts. If one were to add those located in first-ring suburbs the percentage would be much greater. Over time the Presbytery intends to engage a statistically significant number of urban congregations in this process as one way of effecting the change we want to see both in our congregations and in our communities as congregations become missional, disciple-making communities of faith and communities become the place where God's present mission is recognized, celebrated, and embraced.

The other process that is working with urban congregations is to engage them in a variety of **Mission Action Networks** (MANs). We have already spoken of PUMI and its efforts to engage urban and suburban congregations in mutual learning about urban issues and concerns. Other partnerships such as the Pearlington, Mississippi and Zambian Partnerships offer congregations from across the Presbytery opportunities to work together in a third location as a way of developing new relationships of equality and mutuality that can carry over to partnerships back home in Philadelphia. Other partnerships have developed on their own (as intended by the *Missional Plan*) such as Broad Street Ministry, the Latin American Fellowship in Norristown, and the West Kensington Ministry at Norris Square. Each of these efforts brings the congregations of the Presbytery more closely together.

We cannot conclude this section on the Present Situation without making reference to the new **political situation** in the city and the nation. Despite the grim economic news that threatens to overwhelm us, we cannot lose sight of the election of two very able political leaders each with a strong commitment to working to reverse decades of neglect of our cities. The proposed massive Federal investment in the economy offers those who are ready an opportunity to find resources for programs and initiatives that can offer hope and well-being to those who struggle the hardest in our inner-city landscape.

Common Themes

If we are to compare some of the common themes that run across the three principle documents we have mentioned above we would discover wide agreement on four major areas.

- **Spirit-Led Conversations** – The Urban Ministry Task Force Report opens with an appeal for a season of prayer and fasting which supports and enhances dialog. This openness to God’s leading is echoed in the Missional Plan which values diversity and works to enhance trusting, covenantal relationships among members of the Presbytery. The African American Church Growth Strategy concurs with calls for annual meetings for discernment of call and for shaping of witness.
- **Congregations as the Primary Locus of God’s Mission and Ministry** – The Urban Ministry Task Force called for the establishment of five vibrant “missional hubs”. The Missional Plan speaks frequently to the need to empower congregations to join in God’s work of justice, hope, and compassion within the communities in which they are located. The African American Church Growth Strategy calls for additional training for congregational leaders to enable them to strengthen the life and witness of their congregations.
- **Establish a Multi-Disciplinary Urban Ministry Coordinating Team** – The Urban Ministry Task Force called for the establishment of this team as one of its key components to assure that all the major players in the Presbytery’s structure would focus their attention on the critical needs of urban ministry. The Missional Plan also values collaborative mission/ ministry initiatives and calls for the development of both a Racial-Ethnic Ministry Development Center and a Laboratory for Urban

Ministry. The African American Church Growth Strategy also calls for an Evangelism and Church Growth Institute for African American pastors and congregations. If the Presbytery of Philadelphia is to sort out what kind of educational program it will offer, a multi-disciplinary approach is the only way to go forward.

- **Strategies of Education** – Finally the three documents before us also concur in the need for additional training/formation of pastors and other church leaders in a wide range of subject areas, but always with a focus on evangelism, church growth, missional engagement in the community, and urban ministry.

The Missional Challenge

One of the key strategies of the Partnership for Missional Church⁶ is the discernment and testing of **Missional Challenges**. The process appears to be simple, but in reality is anything but simple. It calls upon the church to recognize that the old ways of doing things will only result in the old outcomes over and over again. If an issue has failed to yield to our best problem-solving thinking, then it will require a different approach.

The first task is to discern the shape of the problem. This is the work called for by the Urban Ministry Task Force's appeal for prayer and fasting. The Missional Plan urges a covenant-based, relational approach. The African American Church Growth Strategy appeals for frequent reviews of what we think we know.

Thus a potential first step might be to create a body (perhaps the Multi-Disciplinary Team mentioned in the Urban Ministry Task Force Report) which will dwell with the problem and with God until there is a sense of God's Spirit moving among them.

The second task is to formulate a rough outline of the issue before us. This Missional (or Adaptive) Challenge is stated in such a way that it suggests what the organization (Presbytery) needs to learn in order to become the body that God can use in God's mission to the (urban) world God loves. A sample Missional Challenge might go like this: "How can the Presbytery of Philadelphia cultivate vital worshipping communities of faith that are connected with what God is doing in their communities and equipped to join God there?"

A second possible step could be asking such a Team to reflect on the Missional Challenge before us and formulating it in such a way that it is clear to all what the issue is, how it will be approached, and what kinds of outcomes we can expect.

The third task is the test various approaches to addressing the Missional Challenge and learning from them. In the context of the Partnership for Missional Church we encourage congregations to build "multi-cultural bridges" between themselves and those God is drawing them to be in ministry with by recruiting

⁶ See Appendix 1 for a brief design of the Partnership for Missional Church process as it relates to Missional (or Adaptive) Challenges.

members to move out of the “safe” context of their own congregation and get to know “the other” as real people in their contexts. At the same time others in the congregation are being trained to explore what real hospitality is about through reflection on their own experiences of being welcomed and of having welcomed others and by undertaking some small steps towards inviting others into their lives/homes.

The third suggested step would be to craft some experiments designed to test the Missional Challenge agreed upon in step two and, by testing them, not only learn what works, but an increasingly larger number of congregational members will discover what God is doing with and through them. The Presbytery staff has had an opportunity to discuss the potential development of some missional experiments with two seasoned practitioners of urban ministry. Their approaches are somewhat different but, if engaged in as experiments might have a great deal to teach the Presbytery (and the wider church) about what God is doing in our urban communities and how we (as the Church of Jesus Christ) might join in that mission.

Recommendations

As a place to begin discussion on this paper, I offer the following suggested recommendations for your consideration:

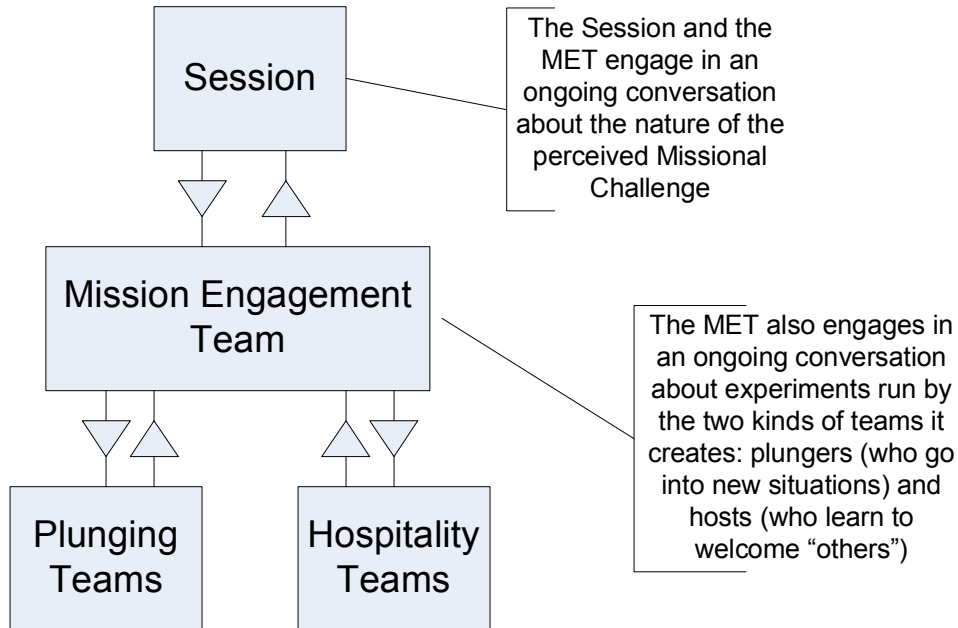
1. That the Presbytery of Philadelphia reaffirm the priority of urban ministry within its life and mission.
2. That the Presbytery of Philadelphia affirm the Partnership for Missional Church approach as the model for its continuing engagement of the urban community through its urban congregations and networks.
3. That the Presbytery of Philadelphia appoint a multi-disciplinary Urban Ministry Coordinating Team (as envisioned in the Urban Ministry Task Force Report) to guide this process of experimentation under the guidance of the Committee on Mission Oversight (COMO).
4. That the Committee on Mission Oversight (COMO) be encouraged to work with the Urban Ministry Coordinating Team (UMCT) to monitor and fund experiments in urban ministry designed to create the vital and vibrant urban congregations (mission hubs) around and through which the whole Presbytery can engage in God’s mission in urban context.

Bill Reinhold, December, 2008

Appendix One

Design for Addressing Missional Challenges

Partnership for Missional Church



Suggested Design for Urban Ministry

Presbytery of Philadelphia

