

DISCERNMENT TASK FORCE
PROPOSAL RATIONALE – SPRING, 2016

In November of 2013, at the request of Presbytery Council, Foothills Presbytery elected a Discernment Task Force. Three factors in particular converged to lead to this action. First, there were major transitions in Presbytery staff. Executive Presbyter George Wilkes had resigned to accept a call as Interim Pastor at the Manning Presbyterian Church, Mary Morrison had resigned to join the staff at Fort Hill Presbyterian Church, and Sandy Sharpe had announced her intention to retire from her position as Office Administrator. Secondly, following actions of the General Assembly in 2012 three congregations had entered into the Gracious Dismissal process of the Presbytery and been subsequently dismissed at their request. Thirdly, finances available for the work of the Presbytery had sharply declined, by nearly 50 percent from ten years earlier, and with a schedule of declining payments from the departing congregations over a period of several years it was clear that decline would continue.

The Task Force was asked to enter into a prayerful season of discernment and make recommendations to help the Presbytery structure and staff itself in the most effective way to move forward in light of all these changing circumstances. Our current manual of operations was adopted in 2003 when much was different. Did any of you think this would be a 2 ½ year process before recommendations were presented? Surely not. Did any of us on the task force think we were committing for that long a time? Definitely not. It was certainly not a straight line process, so this introduction is intended to help you understand where the journey took us.

The first part of the task was to try to get a handle on everything the Presbytery does and how much it costs and how it all works. A review like this had probably not been done since the 2003 restructuring, so a lot of work was required to track how finances have gone over that period and even how various aspects of Presbytery are funded. In addition, we had to factor in the diminishing revenues of upcoming years due to declining payments from congregations which have been dismissed to other denominations, and establish some basic budget goals for the next few years in light of that. The help of our Presbytery staff in all of this has been invaluable.

Next we met with representatives of all Presbytery teams and committees to hear about their work, their goals and financial needs going forward, and to ask blunt questions about how necessary they thought their work was to the larger church. This exercise exposed many frustrations with the roles and expectations of our teams and committees and our ability to staff them with members who can and will actively participate. After this we were in agreement about the need to downsize the bureaucracy and simplify the structure of the Presbytery going forward.

As we were going through this part of our work, a couple of major things were going on that took the total attention of our churches and presbytery and had major implications for our work. They needed to play out in order to provide clarity. One was a result of

General Assembly actions, with the marriage amendment, and the other was a result of our task force's actions in recommending that a special task force be appointed to make recommendations about the future of the Buc Outdoor Center. The General Assembly amendments had the potential to precipitate further losses of congregations and membership and finances, or at the least to create conflict and strain within congregations.

We asked that a task force study the future of Buc Outdoor Center after difficult hours trying to sort out the finances. In addition to budgeted funds to operate, we found that staffing, accounting, and other costs were parts of other line items in the presbytery budget, and that significant over-expenditures of the budget had been occurring. This was a huge red flag as we faced declining dollars to fund the work of Presbytery and expanding expenditures at camp. Add in the confusion of cabin rentals and what the bottom line of that program was and you can begin to understand why nobody really knew the facts about Buc finances until this special task force tackled it. In order for us to make a reasonable proposal about future staffing, structure, and budget, we needed to know the will of Presbytery regarding funding Buc Outdoor Center. That was another painful process for all of us to go through and a lot of healing will need to take place. We learned, though, that full funding of a camping program will not be done through the Presbytery budget.

In addition to these large challenges, some very good and encouraging things have been happening in Foothills Presbytery, so it has been good for us to be able to see those things happen and to see how they have happened. After the last round of General Assembly amendments, a group of interested people began meeting and dreaming about reforming the way the General Assembly and the denomination do business. This group grew and gained momentum and has been helped in every way by our presbytery staff, and we have a series of amendments which are coming before this year's General Assembly and causing much debate throughout the denomination as a result. The Small Church workgroups are functioning very well and providing much help for the leadership of our smaller churches. Collaborations of churches, colleague meetings for educators, for youth ministers, and for children's ministries, are gaining momentum. All are being exceptionally well supported and guided by our presbytery staff, Gordon Raynal and Debbie Foster.

In our proposal you will find a streamlined committee structure and a streamlined Presbytery Council. It is our experience that it is much easier to add to a structure later than to subtract from it after it is already in place, and that ministries which are established due to grass roots motivation are much more likely to be carried out passionately.

The primary investment reflected in this proposal is in people. We strongly believe that it is important for Foothills Presbytery to have two pastoral staff members bringing their gifts to building up the body of Christ in our area. We are recommending that Gordon Raynal and Debbie Foster both be full time, elected for three year terms of service. We recommend that Gordon serve as Executive Presbyter and Stated Clerk, primarily

responsible for the governmental, constitutional, and business elements of the presbytery's business; and that Debbie serve as Associate Executive Presbyter, primarily responsible for the people and ministry side of the Presbytery's work. We are dividing the Presbytery into three regional groups and asking Presbytery staff to take the lead in helping those groups find ways to support, encourage, and do ministry with each other. That may look very different in each region, so we have offered possibilities rather than requirements for what that might look like. After a long season which has brought antagonism and conflict within the church over issues, we believe it is necessary to rebuild relationships and trust and cooperation from the ground up. We believe our professional staff is uniquely qualified to continue leading Foothills Presbytery both in its business and in its maturing into an important and effective part of the body of Christ in this corner of the world.

Other staffing, committee, and financial recommendations will be found in the proposal. Our recommendation is that this plan go into effect beginning January 1, 2017, which gives the rest of this year to make further decisions about implementation, committee makeup, and so forth.

We realize our proposal has an open ended nature to it, and we believe that is a good thing. We are in the midst of a very fluid season of change for congregations, presbyteries, and even the General Assembly. Hopefully this three year period will give us the opportunity for experimenting and evaluating and continuing to grow into what it means to be the Church together in Foothills Presbytery.

Respectfully Submitted,
The Discernment Task Force
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