

THE MANUAL/ ORGANIZATION STRUCTURE OF NATIONAL CAPITAL PRESBYTERY: The historical context for the proposed changes

By G. Wilson Gunn, Jr. (with input from the Presbytery Council)

9-4-13

When the Vision Development Task Force began its work some nine years ago, the then current organizational structure and philosophy was described (by certain persons interviewed by Wilson Gunn) as being a response to a previous structure that was onerous and over-controlling. The perception was that any decision proposed to the Presbytery had to get by three different entities: the Council, the Planning and Evaluation Committee and the Finance Committee. It was reported that, as often as not, a committee would change its proposed action in a way which would satisfy one entity and then find that this change would trip a bell with another entity which would then block the action. Committee leaders described considerable frustration about ever getting anything through this decision-making gauntlet. Thus the resulting revision in the structure gave direct, actionable access to the presbytery by four Committees (Church Development, Mission Coordination and Interpretation, Camps, and Congregational Support and Resourcing) who brought their business directly to the floor, often without “Coordinating Council” consideration and without the “Business Advisory Committee” consideration. The Business Advisory Committee (BAC) then served as the Presbytery’s Board of Directors. This made for several conflicted Presbytery meetings. During this time the Church Development Committee (CDC) made decisions giving various properties and assets to particular churches. One floor conflict was about the CDC’s decision to give the Hoadley Rd. property (remaining from a discontinued NCD effort) to the Covenant Woodbridge congregation for its relocation. The BAC contested that decision on the floor. One of the results of that conflict was that the role of “Board of Directors” was removed from BAC and given to the Coordinating Council. However the Coordinating Council continued to operate like the Coordinating Council had operated with little or no understanding about its functional role as the Board of Directors. The power was with the four big committees which each worked to provide a dimension of ministry with assigned assets available to it.

Occasionally these big four committees made commitments which impacted the ministries of others. There was at least one year when other ministries were significantly shortchanged to cover a large operational shortfall at Glenkirk. There was another when the shortfall in the “2010 Campaign” necessitated covering commitments made by the CDC in New Church Development support with funds that were not realized in the campaign. During this time the Coordinating Council was composed of the chairs of various committees with the Council chair being the former Presbytery moderator.

In short, the structure veered from one that was over-controlling to one that lacked adequate control.

Five years ago the Presbytery approved a new manual in response to several factors:

- a. The vision for the mission of the Presbytery had been determined through focus groups, interviews, and discernment exercises over the course of a year and resulted in a new Mission Statement, the essence of which has been affirmed in two modest revisions, the most recent approved January 2012. The 2008 Manual revision was a structural expression of this Vision for ministry.
- b. The 2008 Manual required that Council be consulted and advise the Presbytery regarding votes requested by the four program committees (one of which was subsequently dissolved). Also the new Manual required a generally elected Council rather than one composed of the various chairs of committees who each brought interests other than concern with the fiduciary integrity of the whole system (although Presbyterian Women (PW), Black Presbyterians United (BPU), and Korean Ministry Caucus (KMC) retained designated seats on Council). The 2008 Manual clarified the Council's role as the Board of Directors of the Presbytery. Previously there was confusion as to the role of the Council as a "coordinating" body that sometime compromised its authority as a fiduciary oversight body.
- c. The current changes proposed are partially in response to the Organizational Review Task Force report that pointed to the weak Council/weak staff model of governance that was regnant at the time the Meadowkirk debt decisions were made. One of the conclusions of the report was the need for a strong Council/strong staff model of governance. The strength of this model is noted by Chaitt ([Governance as Leadership](#)) and Carver ([Boards That Make a Difference: A New Design for Leadership in Nonprofit and Public Organizations; Reinventing Your Board: A Step-by-Step Guide to Implementing Policy Governance](#)) and others.

The 2008 revisions did take a step toward a stronger Council model. The proposed changes take another step in that direction. The strong staff dimension is secured by insuring that the staff have voice at the Council/BOD table. Previously some Council members had held the position that staff were to speak only when spoken to. At one point in the Council's orally reported history staff were even seated outside the Council circle insuring a weak staff position. The voice of the staff is not explicitly sanctioned in the present manual

configuration. They could still be silenced if a Council so chose thus naively tumbling into the pitfalls identified by Chaitt, Carver and others.

- d. The current changes move entirely toward a generally elected Council. This was proposed for the 2008 revision, however due to concerns expressed by PW and BPU, the three dedicated seats for the KMC, BPU and PW were retained. This proposed revision moves away from the current designated seats for PW, BPU and the KMC on the Council just as the 2008 model moved away from representation of all the committees and ministry units. The proposed amendments do insure that the three groups are represented on the Nominating Committee so that qualified candidates for service known to these Nominating Committee members can be lifted up. This shift away from such dedicated seats for stakeholders reflects the observations concerning the inherent weaknesses of this practice noted by Gil Rendle ([Journey in the Wilderness: New Life for Mainline Churches](#)) which advocates for the need to discontinue the model of constituent group representatives sitting on governing boards. (See attached exert from Rendle's book.)

HISTORY OF PRESBYTERY MEETINGS – NEW WAY AND OLD WAY

In January of 2009 the Presbytery directed the Council to implement a “New Way” to do Presbytery meetings for a period of one year in a fashion which would be “*one centered on worship and study.*” There was sufficient satisfaction, through meeting evaluations, that the Council, through its Worship and Theology Committee, continued a season of exploration into new ways to gather. The guiding philosophy (now being more comprehensively evaluated) was that the gathering of the Presbytery attend to the constitutionally mandated actions, but also include relational and generative work centered on common worship and communal study/reflection/conversation.

These “new ways” to do a Presbytery meeting are not directly linked to the proposed manual changes regarding the need to move to a “Strong Presbytery/ Strong Leadership Council/ Strong staff voice” model which is presented in the proposed revision. An evaluation is currently being conducted by the Worship and Theology Committee of the present Council that will provide information which will be useful in shaping the future Presbytery meeting formats. New “new ways” may be explored and aspects of the “old” ways may be resurrected. If there are implications coming from that evaluation for additional structural revisions they will be introduced after this evaluation is complete.