

SYNOD OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS

SOME THOUGHTS ON PER CAPITA

The Role of Per Capita Funds in the Presbyterian Church (USA)

A publication of the Office of the General Assembly Calls per capita “The Presbyterian Covenant Community Fund.” What was devised long ago as a way of equalizing the expenses of commissioners from the “west” -- Ohio and Western New York State -- to participate in the General Assembly in Philadelphia, New York, and other eastern cities has become the funding stream for maintaining the distinctive way in which Presbyterians make decisions together – in gatherings of elders and ministers – Presbyters.

Who depends on Per Capita for the ecclesiastical aspects of ministry? General Assembly, Synods, Presbyteries --- and Sessions! What do I mean by that? Every decision-making council of the church (I dislike the term “governing body.”) receives funds from the offerings made by church members and friends who respond to God’s grace with their stewardship and thanksgiving.

It is easy to see with GA, synods, and presbyteries. Each, by action of the assembled commissioners, sets a per capita amount to fund deliberative assemblies, a variety of ecclesiastical activities, and the offices that support the work of that level of the church. Presbyteries may ask sessions to bear a proportional share of the per capita costs. So sessions know what their fair shares in supporting the ecclesiastical expenses of the GA, their synod, and their presbytery covenant obligation are. Within our synod, the total (depending on presbytery per capita) is from \$30 – 38. But sessions depend on a form of per capita too. It is simply called the Administrative Budget. It supports the actual ministry and mission of the church. And it is the largest variable in the whole “Covenant Community Fund.”

Synod and General Assembly Increases Projected

The Synod Assembly recently set per capita at \$6.38 for 2009 (\$5.70 in 2008). Why a 68 cent increase? There are at least four reasons for the increase.

The congregations within the synod lost a net of 1660 members. This means \$9462 less per capita to synod.

The synod, responding to the rising cost of living, granted raises of 3.5% to staff. That’s about \$6000 in increased costs.

Other cost increases (for rent, utilities, etc.). That adds at least \$4000.

Use of reserves. The 2008 administrative budget of the synod will use about \$26,000 in reserves. This was to minimize the per capita increase in several previous years.

The Joint Per Capita Table (Office of the General Assembly and General Assembly Council) has projected an increase to \$6.04 (from \$5.79) for 2009 and 2010. If the 2008 General Assembly mandates additional actions with per capita budget implications, the increase may be higher. Essentially, every part of the rationale outlined for the synod applies to GA as well.

What can be done about the increased pressure on sessions?

Can costs be contained or reduced? Yes, but.... The reality is that there are no minor cost-cutting measures that will make any meaningful difference. Any major change in administrative budgets, as sessions have learned along with the other councils of the church, will come only from a major change in assumptions. This would, at minimum mean almost total reduction of staff. It could mean elimination of meetings of the decision-making councils of the church.

On the other hand, since the pressure is caused almost entirely by the decreased membership of churches and minimal encouragement for members to be good stewards, sessions and presbyteries have opportunities. It turns out that doing the evangelistic and pastoral care ministries of churches has hidden benefits for the congregations that take them seriously. General Assembly, synod, and presbytery cannot add to the membership of the church. Only congregations can. What of those congregations that are remaining faithful in situations where growth is very unlikely? They deserve the thanks of their fellow congregations and may need some help.

Per capita and the desire to influence the mission directions of the church

In recent years, some sessions have decided to withhold per capita support of the General Assembly in particular. Will increases in per capita be palatable to such sessions? Probably not, but I would ask that they think about what really happens when they withhold GA per capita.

The primary impact is not on the General Assembly. Not while presbyteries are responsible to pay GA and synod per capita in full, so long as they have the resources to do so.

The primary impact is on the presbytery and on the other sessions of congregations within the presbytery. Presbytery budgets must be adjusted to reflect decreased per capita support. Sessions have to cope with the increase in per capita necessary to allow their neighbors to use withholding to try to influence the decisions of the GA. There are more direct ways to express

concerns about actions of the larger church, including more involvement in the decision-making councils of the church.

I'm attaching two charts that Bob Sheldon, our Director of Funds Development, has produced to demonstrate the way in which members and congregations support and benefit from ministries of the presbyteries, synods, and General Assembly. While his emphasis is on mission support, the flow is similar in the per capita funding stream.

Open to Conversation

As in all matters of the ministry of the church, particularly in the synod, I am open to conversation about per capita and the work of the church. Feel free to send email to zbuxton@att.net. Call me on my cell phone (303-570-2622).

Find more information about the Synod of the Rocky Mountains at synodrm.org.

Find out a lot about the General Assembly and other agencies of our church at pcusa.org.

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