

# Special Administrative Review Committee for Geneva Presbytery

Report to Synod Ministry and Mission Council, June 10, 2015

In May 2014, a Special Administrative Review Committee (SARC) was established by the Synod Council, charged with the responsibility of making a report to the Council concerning tumultuous happenings in the life of the Presbytery of Geneva (POG). Specifically, the SARC Mandate is described as follows:

*At the request of the Geneva Presbytery Council, the Synod of the Northeast Council agrees to establish a Special Administrative Review Committee (SARC) to review presbytery operations. This SARC shall have the authority to review operations and procedures at the Geneva Presbytery that include but are not limited to:*

- *financial aspects of the presbytery such as written financial procedures, practiced financial procedures, a review of the books, income and expenditures, and review of the audit when it is complete*
- *written policies and procedures including but not limited to presbytery by-laws, presbytery standing rules, presbytery manual of operations, personnel policies*
- *operations and minutes of the presbytery council and presbytery committees*
- *minutes of presbytery meetings*
- *the conduct of the Executive Presbyter as it relates to presbytery operations, presbytery finances, presbytery council, presbytery committees, professional relationships with presbytery teaching elders*

*In its review function the SARC shall have the authority to interview presbyters, staff, contractors and other concerned parties as well as request any documents relevant to this review. All meetings called by the SARC shall be recorded.*

The original mandate was for the SARC report to be made to Synod Council by December, 2014, but the process has taken longer than anticipated. The members of SARC have pledged to do the job well and not simply meet a deadline. Synod's patience is appreciated. Many thanks, also, to all who have shared information and observations with the SARC. One factor in the delay of this final report is that many have been wanting and willing to speak with the SARC, with the most recent interview taking place at the beginning of March.

This, then, is the final report of SARC to the Synod Ministry and Mission Commission (formerly Synod Council). It is substantially the same as the January 26 Update Report. The work of the Presbytery in recovering its purpose, unity, health and organization is still far from complete, but the members of SARC believe that the leadership and the body of the presbytery are indeed moving forward on all of these fronts.

## I. COMMUNITY BUILDING

- Executive Presbyter Joelle Davis' termination of employment occurred on June 24, 2014 (although she was paid through December 24, 2014). Since that time the Presbytery has been slowly reviewing, reorganizing and reorienting itself. Council has developed (and is further developing) a schedule of grieving, healing and community-building opportunities for Presbytery meetings and other gatherings. The SARC believes that careful attention to healing will continue to be important in the life of Presbytery for the foreseeable future, not only at Presbytery and Council meetings, but in the work of committees and in interactions with congregations.

**[ ] Council is to be commended for developing a series of healing-themed Presbytery gatherings, for scheduling listening sessions throughout the Presbytery, and for planning a Presbytery retreat on April 25, 2015.**

- The coming year should be a time for General Council and Presbytery committees to give focused attention on visits to sessions and congregations. There is some sense at Council meetings that things are "getting back to normal", but the SARC is concerned that there may be less visible pockets of hurt still festering, particularly with individuals and congregations on the margins. That peacefulness is being experienced at Council does not prove that it is widespread. The recent volatility could have left congregations angry, despairing, disaffected and/or disinterested about participating in a connectional body - all potentially undermining the future ministry, mission, stewardship and spiritual health of the

Presbytery. It might be very wise for each Presbytery committee (in coordination with other committees) to make outreach to congregations a proactive priority for its work.

*[ ] Triennial visits have not been happening in recent years, so all the more reason for Council, Presbytery Committees, and transitional leadership to make every effort to reach out to congregations. Triennial visits can be perceived by congregations as having an investigating function, but the kind of visit envisioned by SARC is not to ask "What's going wrong with your church?", but, instead, "How can we help support your congregation's health and mission?" Presbytery leadership may be too stretched to immediately deliver that support, but there needs to at least be a sense of "we want to walk with you, learn from you and share with you".*

- There were written testimonies at the March, 2014 Presbytery Meeting prepared by individuals who felt particularly impacted by actions during the Executive Presbyter's tenure. SARC has learned that these statements could not be shared due to docket time limits, but were received by the Clerk Pro-Tem with the understanding that they would be included in the minutes of the meeting. SARC has been unable to secure these written statements because the Clerk determined that since they were not presented verbally they were not part of the meeting minutes. To our knowledge these testimonies have been lost. Upon invitation, a few copies of the original testimonies have been submitted to SARC.

*[ ] Listening sessions coordinated by Council in February and March, though not as well attended as had been hoped, demonstrated leadership's desire to hear every story that needs to be told. Listening sessions like these are not to defend or debate; they are primarily for the purpose of listening.*

- Conversations about the health of the Presbytery invariably include questions about future executive leadership. SARC members appreciate the willingness of Council and the Personnel Committee to accept the idea of a new model for leadership that takes into account the need for healing and community-building as "Job One". SARC members strongly recommend a transitional leadership model, with strong skills in leading a presbytery through processes to develop an on-going structure, standing rules, refinement of core mission, and other ways of operating as a healthy presbytery. David Olsen's *Consultation & Recommendations Report* has rung true to most of the folks SARC interviewed, and SARC has tested the idea of "someone like David Olsen" as an example of transitional leadership focused on healing, and there is openness to just such an idea.

*[ ] Synod can assist the Presbytery's search for transitional leadership by providing, when the time is right, names of possible candidates who may have these skills.*

*[ ] Council needs to work closely with the Personnel Committee in drafting a job description for transitional leadership that emphasizes the needed skills.*

*[ ] This transitional leader must be knowledgeable about the POG's history with the Executive Presbyter position in order to be effective and avoid repeating past mistakes.*

## II. GOVERNANCE

- A serious problem with the Presbytery's operations has been the complete lack of leadership training for committee chairs and committee members. When things became volatile over the last several years procedures were inadequate or nonexistent. Diminished competence, confidence, and accountability are a serious danger to healing, community-building, and the recruitment and training of new volunteers and leaders. Training for the Committee on Ministry and the Personnel Committee is acutely needed at this time. Experienced trainers from within and outside the Presbytery need to be identified and invited to help.

*[ ] Synod can assist by suggesting names of persons from adjacent presbyteries with the training skills needed by the Presbytery of Geneva.*

*[ ] The Clerk Pro-Tem (who will become Stated Clerk in September) is devising a schedule of training opportunities for clerks of session throughout the Presbytery*

- During EP Davis' tenure, decision-making authority was shifted from Presbytery to Council. This concentration of power had resulted from the decision to reduce the number of Presbytery meetings. Many Council members resisted others' expressed suspicions that they were overly influenced by the Executive Presbyter. The Presbytery has now returned to its former schedule of more frequent Presbytery meetings. Note: the original reason for fewer Presbytery meetings was that they would be replaced by mission-oriented information-sharing and training, but this never happened.
  - [ ] *Presbytery meetings are now being scheduled for approximately six times each year. This will do a lot to move forward in grieving, healing, story-telling, and community-building.*
- Council is now committed to greater transparency in its operations and finances. This is a very important element in trust-building.
  - [ ] *Council has been spending significant time hearing detailed reports from the Treasurer, and good efforts are underway to present detailed financial information to Presbytery.*
- SARC has developed a set of "Interim Rules" (that has been reviewed by the Synod Mission and Ministry Commission) to fill the gap. SARC encouraged the Presbytery Council to adopt the Interim Rules to serve as a temporary framework for decision-making and operations until such time as the infrastructure and leadership are in place to craft more permanent guidelines.
  - [ ] *Council reviewed the Interim Rules that were presented to it by SARC in March, and subsequently presented them to the Presbytery for a first reading at its May 2015 meeting. The Interim Rules will provide a starting point for normalized operations and a foundation for improvements by Council and future transitional leadership as time moves forward.*
  - [ ] *Synod is encouraged to maintain these or some similar framework for Interim Rules for use in other troubled situations that may occur in the future.*
- With clearer guidelines and increased trust in one another, SARC trusts that not only more individuals but more congregations will be encouraged to participate in the organized life of Presbytery through nominating and volunteering.
  - [ ] *The Nominating Committee has been having a challenging time recruiting committee members due to the stress and conflict in the Presbytery. SARC believes that normalized operations, clearer job descriptions and a renewed sense of purpose should give a big boost to the Nominating Committee.*

### III. FINANCES

- There is suspicion and uncertainty with regard to financial management of Presbytery funds and whether, in fact, fraud was committed during the Executive Presbyter's span of employment. The FBI has been investigating. As far as the SARC is aware, the case is still open, but FBI action on the matter is not expected because the amounts under investigation do not reach a certain threshold for FBI action. It should be noted that in SARC's conversations with the FBI the agent seemed to be encouraging Synod to take action of some kind "to protect the nice ladies who have faithfully and trustingly contributed their money to the Presbytery" (the agent appears to have a background in church life!).
  - [ ] *It would be helpful for the General Council to provide some form of update or closure concerning the FBI investigation. Is the case open or closed? What has been found? Many people know about this FBI investigation, but few know its current status. We have learned that a number of congregations temporarily withheld their mission support to Presbytery - not because of a particular social stand, but because of lack of trust in Presbytery financial operations. Fortunately, SARC has now heard that most of these congregations have met their commitments.*
- Whether or not law enforcement files any charges, there is a wish on the part of some that there be accountability for leadership of an environment with insufficient financial controls such that someone in her position *could* conceivably be guilty of fraud.

*[ ] The Finance Committee and Treasurer are working hard to establish better protocols around budget lines, expense vouchers, and designated funds.*

- There has been a general lack of awareness about the state of POG finances and frustration on the part of a few that relevant questions received insufficient or unsatisfying responses. The co-mingling of funds supporting POG and Camp Whitman and the fact that staff costs, but not operating expenses, for Camp are included in the POG budget contributes to the lack of transparency in understanding the accounts.

*[ ] See previous item.*

- A symptom of dysfunction is the fact that the Chair of the Budget & Finance Committee (B&F), Jim Yao, was not informed that he was Presbytery Treasurer until 2.5 years after he became Chair. Fortunately, he has past career training and experience in the financial management of mega-software systems that well prepares him for this role. Since learning he is the Treasurer, he has engaged at a much more detailed level with all aspects of Presbytery finances. He continues to chair a now fully-engaged Budget and Finance Committee.

*[ ] Council has made a decision to divide the Treasurer and Finance Committee Chair into two separate positions. A Treasurer has now been named, due to begin soon, while Jim Yao will continue as chair of the Finance Committee.*

- Jim Yao spends one day each week at the office, works with auditors, the bookkeeper, law enforcement, staff and others, managing the day-to-day accounting, putting out fires, resolving problems, etc. A budget development strategic planning effort has been underway, and the adoption of the 2015 budget by POG was delayed until March to allow for the development of a realistic financial path forward.

*[ ] SARC considers this delay in producing a 2015 budget to have been a wise decision.*

- Specific expenses of the Executive Presbyter were investigated to assure that all unresolved financial disputes were addressed prior to the end of the year. B&F has worked with the Presbytery lawyer in this effort.

*[ ] SARC has confidence in this process.*

- There is a collection of financial policies/guidelines which provide a framework for the present. Changes need to be made and this is on the agenda of B&F to be addressed in 2015. Some additional financial controls have already been put in place as a result of the past year's experiences.

*[ ] The Treasurer and Finance Committee are working on this.*

## IV. MISSION

- There is confusion about the Presbytery's mission focus and how it relates to the mission of churches.

*[ ] A Mission Committee of the Presbytery needs to be re-established to converse with congregations about their desires, experiences, and expertise with regard to congregational mission, local and beyond. There is a committee that reviews requests for mission grants from congregations, but it does not coordinate or equip mission efforts in congregations beyond a grant check. Emerging out of a period of turmoil it could be very beneficial for the Presbytery to take the time to do this kind of assessment.*

- There is concern about the future of Camp Whitman.

*[ ] Camp Whitman has long been considered the "crown jewel" of Geneva Presbytery's mission, but in recent years serious questions have been asked (but largely unanswered) concerning the finances, sustainability, registration numbers, and oversight of the camp. Also, the "buy-in" from congregations has been diminished as many of the congregations age and no longer send as many children to Camp Whitman. The simple question asked by many presbyters, "how much does it cost the Presbytery to run this camp?" is hard to answer. For example, Presbytery office staff have camp responsibilities and their remuneration ought to be considered in answering the question.*

*[ ] It is fortunate that when the Executive Presbyter's employment ended, the Council*

*recruited three skilled people to serve as "Camp Operators" for Camp Whitman. A Camp Operator is a requirement of state regulations. The Camp Operators operated the camp in 2014, but wished to conclude their work before the start of the 2015 program in June. This would have required three significant actions: (1) Reconvene the Camp Whitman Board of Directors, (2) Hire a Camp Director for 2015, and (3) determine who shall serve as Camp Operator (especially because transitional leadership will not be in place before the start of the 2015 camp season).*

- [ ] Reconvening the Camp Board will be a challenge: the board had not met in two years. The membership of the Board from Genesee Valley Presbytery is now just one member, with three more needed. Geneva is further along, and we believe that there is full representation now. When asked to put forward some names, the Nominating Committee Chair in Genesee Valley has had some significant questions that are not easily answered until a Board actually begins to meet: what are the by-laws, what are the length of terms, what is the financial stability of the camp, and what is the exact relationship between the camp and the presbyteries? The purpose of the board is somewhat vague. A validated board would have full authority over the camp assets, finances and operations, but the Presbytery of Geneva, which owns the property and facilities, is currently handling many of these functions. At one point the Board made a recommendation to the two presbyteries to become an "Advisory Board", but it is not clear to SARC if either presbytery adopted that understanding. However, new by-laws developed by the Board when it last met may provide a good starting point for a re-gathered Board.*
- [ ] A new Director, Lea Kone, a member of the Downtown United Presbyterian Church in Rochester, has been hired by the Camp Operators. She is trained and experienced in camp management, and grew up at Camp Whitman.*
- [ ] The Board recently met for the first time in over two years, but is not yet prepared for all of the tasks at hand. For this reason, the three Camp Operators proposed to General Council that they continue their role through December, 2015, and this was approved. SARC is much relieved by this decision.*
- [ ] The Camp Whitman Board, when previously active, participated in a Rochester Ad Council in-depth conversation about the camp, with many suggestions about marketing the camp in a period with fewer children from congregations attending. The notes from those meetings may prove invaluable in re-starting the Board. Also, the Board has previously benefited from consultation with the Presbyterian Church Camp and Conference Association (PCCCA) and a new Board and camp director are encouraged to make it a high priority to have a PCCCA consultant come in to assess the situation and make recommendations.*
- [ ] In two interviews with Karen Andrus, mother of Graham Andrus, a counselor who drowned at the camp in 2011, SARC found a number of significant loose ends from this tragic event. Although apparently not connected to the broader review of Presbytery operations mandated by Synod in forming the SARC, this single event exposed a number of serious problems in oversight, accountability, and communication that center on camp policies and the role of the former EP, Joelle Davis. Because of the specificity involved, SARC recommendations on this matter are delineated in a separate attached document.*

## V. SYNOD

- It could be helpful for the Synod to clarify the help available to presbyteries, councils, congregations, and/or individuals in times of conflict, volatility, or dysfunction. Some of the difficulty faced by Geneva Presbytery came from the different courses of action taken by different players; that included some concerned persons approaching the Synod Transitional Executive for assistance, at least one concerned person contacting the FBI, and finally a formal request from the General Council to the Synod Council

seeking the assistance of a SARC. If there was a clear set of steps to follow it was not apparent to the distressed and conflicted leadership and members of the Presbytery.

[ ] *Synod needs to clarify and publicize a crisis contact protocol for presbyteries.*

- The entire experience suggests that some sort of "Rapid Response Team" needs to be waiting in the Synod wings for such conflicts when they occur. Such a team would not need to be involved for the long-term, but a rapid response could be a critical factor in keeping a conflict from getting worse in the early stages.

[ ] *We recommend the Synod explore the creation of a roster of rapid response people, some of whom could be called upon for rapid response in a particular situation.*

## VI. SOME GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

- From the start, SARC has been welcomed into the life of Geneva Presbytery. It makes sense, because it was Presbytery Council that requested Synod's assistance in the first place.
- From the start, it seemed that SARC's mere presence at meetings and in interviews helped all the parties to the conflict "play nicer" with each other. It could also be posited that the departure of EP Davis before the SARC began to meet facilitated more forthright communication by people interviewed.
- It has been apparent to SARC that the difficulties faced by the POG are not a just matter of inadequate, outdated or ignored protocols and procedures (although we are obviously suggesting many revisions in these), but an organizational culture. Various people, in interviews, have suggested some keywords to describe what is present or lacking in this culture: accountability, transparency, bullying, fear, avoidance, factions, distrust, secrecy, etc. Leadership of all kinds, paid and volunteer, needs to understand that any process of "healing" and "rebuilding community" will need to address this culture, not just specific "fixes".
- As has been noted above, Council in particular has already begun to initiate changes based on SARC's observations and recommendations. SARC believes that there is fertile ground for change.