

1 **Synod of the Mid-Atlantic**
2 **241st Assembly – Richmond, VA**
3 **March 12-13, 2018**
4

5 **A New Initiative - "The Next Generation"**
6

7 **Introduction:**

8 Over the past three years the Synod of the Mid Atlantic has been in a state of
9 inquiry, discovery and discernment regarding its role among the fourteen
10 presbyteries it seeks to serve. As the denomination debated the question over the
11 future of synods, we in the Mid-Atlantic, reviewed our purpose in light of this
12 larger conversation. Ours is a unique synod as we were the last to be organized,
13 the largest to be designed, and the most diverse in our constituency. Mid-Atlantic
14 was the only synod to assimilate four all Black presbyteries and one Black synod
15 into its new structure resulting from the 1983 Reunion vote of the church. Those
16 presbyteries and synod included Catawba, Cape Fear, Southern Virginia, and
17 Yadkins, and the Catawba Inter-presbytery Agency.

18 It has been awkward and, at times, an adversarial season of compromises which
19 has lead us to our present structure. In a time of rising racial tensions, stoked by
20 the new celebrity of White Supremacist groups in the country, the Synod is
21 finding its ministry renewed by the need to offer an alternative vision of God's
22 people living in community, witnessing to compassion and justice for all.

23 At the 240th Synod Assembly, September 11-12, 2017, a draft document for a new
24 initiative was shared with the assembly titled "The Next Generation." This
25 initiative seeks to respond to the critical shortage of African American Clergy in
26 the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the need within every presbytery to be served
27 by able Black leadership. In response to this challenge, the synod would commit
28 itself to identifying, nurturing and serving as advocates for the next generation of
29 African American clergy to serve congregations and councils of the church and
30 throughout the Presbyterian structure.

31 This proposal and this crises are not descriptive of the situation in our
32 presbyteries alone. This dilemma is affecting our entire denomination. The aging
33 of Black clergy and the shrinking resources of our African American congregations

34 as they age, has created a bleak outlook for us all. We are looking at the tragic
35 loss of their witness, their spirit and their voice at a time when civil discourse and
36 civil liberties are being threatened.

37 Vibrant, imaginative and bold Black leadership is needed in our presbyteries, our
38 communities, our mid-councils and in arenas of ecumenical and interfaith
39 dialogue. The Synod of the Mid-Atlantic is ready, able and poised by God's grace
40 to respond to this need.

41 If the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. hopes to be a denomination of all people, all
42 races, and all nations it must recommit itself to the work of planting and
43 supporting racial-ethnic congregations. The Gospel imperative does not
44 discriminate. Our passivity...our indifference to the situation of a declining Black
45 presence in our congregations, presbyteries and other governing bodies suggests
46 that we do not and have not found value in the contributions of Black voices in
47 our church.

48 The time to take a new course of action is now. The sole African American
49 Seminary of the PCUSA, Johnson C. Smith, withdrew from the
50 Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta. It no longer offers a
51 Master's Degree Program. Its future is unsure as accreditation lies in limbo. The
52 last wave of African American clergy to matriculate at Johnson C Smith
53 Theological Seminary and other Presbyterian theological schools is fast retiring.
54 Many aged Black pastors are continuing to serve as best they can as it does not
55 appear that relief provided by younger colleagues is on its way.

56 The viability of almost all of our African American congregations weighs in the
57 balance. Many cannot be redeveloped in time to ensure a future ministry, but
58 many are able to be helped. The best help we can provide is a well-trained pastor
59 excited about the opportunity to serve God through the pulpit of a church.

60 The "New Initiative" to identify, nurture and advocate "The Next Generation" of
61 African American pastors for the church is a project which we can launch as a
62 mission of the Synod of the Mid-Atlantic. We are the best candidate among all
63 Synods to take on this challenge. We have:

- 64 • A strong cadre of African American leaders both Teaching and Ruling Elders.

- 65 • Churches, both black white congregations, who have a legacy of supporting
66 strong Black representation and participation in our denominational work.
- 67 • Johnson C. Smith and Union Presbyterian Seminary are located within our
68 bounds. Each has faculty, resources and vision for growing their
69 constituency of racial ethnic students.
- 70 • Existing associations of African American leaders in caucuses and affinity
71 groups.
- 72 • Access to national groups such as the Lilly Foundation to approach for
73 funding and consultation.

74 In recent years, Synods have experienced renewed purpose and outreach. They
75 have discerned for themselves a particular compelling mission and vision by
76 which they are known. The Synod of Living Waters was the incubator for the
77 Living Waters for the World mission of providing clean water to communities
78 around the world. The Synod of the Sun, in the same way, is providing solar
79 panels to power communication systems and illuminate villages. It is our time to
80 act.

81 The Synod of the Mid- Atlantic like no other Synod has experienced the pain and
82 the struggle to come together as an integrated and celebrating body of the
83 PCUSA. We know personally the stories of our African American congregations.
84 We know of their contributions to their communities and to our denomination.
85 We know of their losses as well. And we know that in this time of polarization of
86 race and class and politics that the Black Church can lend its voice to create a
87 healthier dialogue. These congregations however, need renewed leadership and
88 inspired pastors filling their pulpits. We can help and we must; less we lose the
89 powerful witness of the African American legacy of our church.

- 90 • What is outlined and argued in this paper is for a full blown effort to “tip”
91 our Synod forward into the future.
- 92 • What is required is a thoughtful and well researched presentation of the
93 facts and the pathways to launch an initiative of such importance.
- 94 • What is necessary is to confront those anxieties that insist that our Synod
95 has nothing to contribute to the national character of our church or to the
96 needs of struggling congregations.

97 The approach we need is to build new alliances within our presbyteries and with
98 our General Assembly networks beginning with racial-ethnic ministries. Other
99 supporting entities might include Research Services, Young Adult and Collegiate
100 programs, our conference centers, our colleges, and our universities. Our
101 P.C.U.S.A. is designed to be a structure of interconnectedness. Let's use it!

102 We will need deep thinkers and strategists to provide us with a plan which we can
103 evaluate and commit to, one which gives us small successes and great inspiration.

104 Or, we can leave this challenge to the generations which follow us. Surely they
105 will find a way. Yet, by stepping away we fail to engage in the work that will
106 change us. We are the problem and we are, in part, the solution. This challenge
107 comes under our watch. Racism and racial reconciliation have informed our entire
108 lives. The ongoing occurrences of racial strife in America today suggest that the
109 work of peacemaking is yet unfinished. We have an opportunity and a call to do
110 more tomorrow than what we did yesterday or the day before. Even if we do not
111 have perfect answers and flawless approaches, we must acknowledge our
112 complicity to the sin of racism and commit anew to the greatest of
113 commandments to love God with all of our heart and strength and voice and to
114 love our neighbor as ourselves.

115 **The Next Generation Initiative Enabling Action**

- 116 1. The "Next Generation Initiative" was affirmed by the 241st Synod Assembly.
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- 118 2. The 241st Synod Assembly empowered the Executive Committee to
119 appoint a "team" to plan a strategy to move the Initiative forward to
120 include such features as:
 - 121 • conversation and collaboration with identified partners
 - 122 • a timeline for actions and engagement
 - 123 • a process to share the Initiative with member presbyteries
 - 124 • a projection of funding needs
 - 125 • considerations for staff support and consultation
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- 127 3. The sum of \$6,000.00 was approved from Presbytery Initiatives Funds for
128 the team to cover expenses related to meetings, travel, production,
129 interviews, research etc.