

Synod of the Sun and Presbyterian Disaster Assistance
Feasibility Study Report
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1. Introduction

Recent History of Synod of the Sun (SoS) and Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA)

Synod of the Sun (SoS) and Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA) have partnered for more than 10 years to create hope out of the chaos caused by disasters. Since 2013, PDA has made more than 50 disaster-related grants totaling nearly \$3,700,000 to the synod's 11 presbyteries. These grants were made primarily for damaged churches, volunteer hosting sites, and long-term recovery groups.

The Problem

PDA's grants in the synod are made, and its accompanying management support is provided, singly to discrete events. New grants are made to each new need. From one disaster to the next, there is little continuity of communication, coordination, cooperation, and collaboration (the "4C's") within the synod and with PDA. South Louisiana, Mission, and New Covenant Presbyteries have some inter-presbytery history with the 4Cs, but the 4C's have not been practiced throughout the synod as a whole on an ongoing basis. Further, there are not synod-wide protocols and mechanisms for the disaster cycle of preparedness, response, mitigation, and long-term recovery.

Minimally, these dynamics limit leveraging the:

- Sense of being a connectional church within the synod and within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) via PDA
- Practice of congregations being a Matthew 25 Church in their communities that have been impacted by a disaster
- Volunteer and financial resources within the synod
- Financial resources of PDA
- Volunteer resources within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

A Way Forward

SoS and PDA leadership wanted to explore how the limiting issues cited above might be addressed and transformed. To explore possible avenues for this, SoS, with the blessing of the synod's EP Forum, and PDA conducted a feasibility study to determine if the 4Cs could be developed between the synod's 11 presbyteries and with PDA. With SoS' agreement, PDA assigned its senior advisor, David L. Myers, to develop, implement, and report on the results of the study.

2. Methodology

Due to Covid-19, rather than meeting in person, Myers met via Zoom video with each of the presbyteries. Meetings generally lasted for an hour and were largely based on a framework document that outlined the challenges (summarized above) and on a set of questions approved by SoS leadership. The framework document and the questions were distributed in advance of the meetings to the presbyteries. The questions were:

- What are your thoughts about the challenge as described in the framework document?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, does the status quo need to change or should well enough be left alone? Leaving well enough alone would be a 1 and things must change would be a 10.
- What kind of program and structure do you think would address the concerns in the framework document?
- What might be the challenges your program and structure would face?
- Do you have any concerns about a partnership agreement that may need to develop between Synod of the Sun and PDA?
- If you are in a position to do so, would you be willing to advocate for a commitment of presbytery funds for a program that addresses the concerns?

Groups ranged from one to nine people, with an average of around five participants. Myers recorded answers in real time and copy edited soon after the meeting. The chart below shows the dates and times of the interviews:

Presbytery	Date	Time (EDT)	Contact
Grace	3/15	3:00	Gloria Beard gloria@gracepresbytery.org
Tres Rios	3/17	2:00	Kay Long kaylong9@sbcglobal.net
Mission	3/17	4:00	Sallie Watson presbyter@missionpby.org
Palo Duro	3/23	3:00	Scott Campbell eppdpssl@gmail.com
Pines	3/24	Noon	George Wortham georgeigppines@gmail.com
New Covenant	4/8	4:00	Lynn Hargrove lhargrove@pbyofnewcovenant.org
Indian Nations	4/12	11:00	Charlie Smith presbyterypastor@okinp.org
Cimarron	4/14	10:00	Gordon Edwards edwards.pax@gmail.com
Eastern Oklahoma	4/15	10:30	Tim Blodgett tim@eokpresbytery.org
South Louisiana	4/20	11:00	Donna Stogner dstogner@gmail.com
Arkansas	4/27	11:00	Stewart Smith stewart@presbyteryofarkansas.org

3. Results of the Interviews

While the interviews generally followed the structure of the questions, they varied in length of time spent on each question, which had the effect of diversifying the content. This section summarizes major themes and specific issues arising from the interviews.

The BLUF (Bottom Line Up Front):

- What about the way things are now?
 - *The status quo of the 4Cs is not acceptable; something needs to be done*
- What, then, needs to be done?
 - *At the top of the list is an organized, inter-presbytery communication system*
- Would you be willing to advocate for funding if it were needed?
 - *Yes, but: a willingness to advocate for funding depends on what IT is*

Is the status quo acceptable?

No. The range of this was 5-10, with an average of about 7 on the need for change. People want to be connected and help when a disaster hits and right now, presbyteries that were not hit do not feel or have connection with presbyteries that were. They hear about the disaster but do not hear about how they can specifically help. The dissatisfaction with the status quo included no:

- Communication system
 - unaware of resources
 - lack of coordination: do not know who to contact about volunteering
 - much good will but not sure who to contact to put it into action
- Continuity of learnings from and wisdom gained from previous disasters (host site churches must start anew)
- Ongoing relationship with local disaster tables
- Knowledge of who's coordinating from the outside
- Ongoing plan
- Experience to know how well they responded; they know how the community responded but can't really tell where they themselves had failures or successes
- Preparedness training: there's a critical need for someone to help congregations prepare.

What kind of program and structure do you think would address the concerns?

A strong majority of the presbyteries wanted something put in place to address the deficiencies. However, because synod leadership wanted the presbyteries thinking from a blank slate rather than responding to several models put forth by SoS and PDA, no consensus model emerged. There were several references to FLAPDAN as a model from which to learn and possibly borrow. While several ideas were more fully developed than others, themes emerged related to the purpose, development, design, and staffing of a program.

Purpose:

- Create a communication network between presbyteries for rapid communication

- Identify points of contact for each presbytery
- Document and keep current human and material resources throughout the synod
- Enable collaboration with other denominations
- Train presbyteries, churches, and individuals on preparedness and deployment

Development:

- Focus on action rather than structure
- Use consensus rather than top-down, decision-making process
- Start with a Synod Group in which SoS allows for two or more presbyteries to come together to form a network
- Start with a doable plan regarding resources and let it grow from there
- Make it immediate and tangible so that people could get behind it

Design:

- Picture the synod as the hub and the presbyteries as the spokes that would communicate with the hub
- Presbyteries would need to be intra-organized in relationship to the synod-level organization
- Paid staff (ranging from part to full time) would be required to lead or support the work
- Volunteer staff, especially in the presbyteries, would be needed to support synod paid staff
- Enable volunteers from rural Presbyterian churches to do hands-on work
- Possibly use racism network as a model for disaster network (are you called to disaster ministry?)
- Consider FLAPDAN and other denominational disaster structures as models from which to build
- Do not overreach

Staffing:

- Not necessarily a disaster expert is needed--disaster expertise can be taught
- A natural connector that can function in a variety of settings is more difficult to teach
- Someone with a social work background
- Someone with a community organizing background
- The person needs to be a disaster expert
- Someone from a ministry perspective who has the skill and knowledge to build enthusiasm

PDA Role:

- We want to see more of PDA, not less
- PDA needs to communicate more clearly and broadly who it is and what it does and does not do

- There may be tension between mid-council autonomy and central power of Louisville
- This must be a partnership with PDA and not just SoS
- PDA needs to be more hands on at the site and earlier rather than waiting for recovery

Challenges:

- Money: funding a project like this would require all presbyteries' involvement
- Finding the right personnel
- Overstretched staff even if full-time
- Few disaster points of contact in churches
- Lack of pastors in small churches and elderly churches; some churches are on life support
- Political and theological divisions
- Keeping the project alive and updated
- Ignorance of disasters and PDA
- The increased number and intensity of disasters
- Maintaining the information from the presbyteries current
- Training—recruiting enough people committed to disaster as a calling
- Getting 11 presbyteries to agree and, even more challenging, to have all 11 fund it
- Some presbyteries that have not been hit with a disaster recently may not participate

Advocacy for Funding:

- Yes, without question
- We will wait and see; we need to be further down the road before advocating for it
- We do not have enough money now for current commitments
- We would need to understand that some of us would be giving more and not benefit equal to our giving; it would be a mutual aid situation.

4. Next Steps

Myers will meet with Synod of the Sun and Presbyterian Disaster Assistance leadership to review findings and plan for next steps.