



# SYNOD OF THE SUN

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Assessment and Visioning Report

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**RESEARCH  
SERVICES**

# Overview



The Synod of the Sun consists of eleven Presbyteries which span across Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas. The membership of the Synod accounts for over 150,000 members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The mission of the Synod of the Sun is to serve Christ by connecting, equipping, and empowering Presbyterians for Christ's mission within and beyond the Synod's bounds.

The Synod holds this missional mind frame as they believe that when we work together across boundaries, we make visible the Good News and find wholeness as the Body of Christ. In our common calling, we impact lives together.

Research Services was contacted by Steve Shive, Interim Executive Director, Synod of the Sun to conduct an analysis of a series of recent listening sessions. A total of seven questions were presented to the presbyteries for discussion and are included in this report. These questions varied from the current state of the synod to possibilities for the future. Summarized notes from each of these sessions were provided to Research Services for analysis.

Responses from the Presbyteries were collected between April and June of 2023 via Zoom conversations between the Synod and Presbytery Councils.

Of the eleven possible Presbyteries to respond, **ten** Presbyteries submitted responses to the questions, with **one** Presbytery not responding to the call for answers.

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# Purpose of the Synod

What is your understanding of the purpose of a synod?

Presbyteries offered their perspective on the purpose of the Synod and discussed how they felt the Synod is helpful, its functions and duties, and what they thought the focus of the Synod is.

## Synod helpfulness

- ✓ Assists with projects that Presbyteries cannot do alone.
- ✓ Source of funding.
- ✓ Gathering place for Mid Council leaders.
- ✓ Helpful when there is no Presbytery leader.

## Synod function & duties

- ✓ Acts as a coordinator between Members, Presbyteries, and GA.
- ✓ Youth Conference
- ✓ Scholarships
- ✓ Institutional support
- ✓ Adjudication

## Synod focus

- ✓ Seminary education
- ✓ Finding a common mission that all presbyteries can participate in.
- ✓ Being a supportive body to presbyteries and congregations.
- ✓ Economics of ministry

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*The question is, if there was no Synod, would we build one now?*

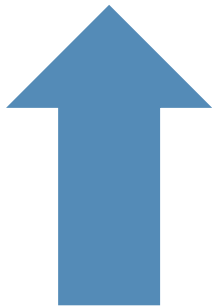
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From the Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery Council Responses

# The current state of the Synod

What do you believe the current state of the Synod of the Sun to be?

The Presbyteries were overall positive in their thoughts on the current state of the Synod with most having a positive perspective of the Synod. However, a few Presbyteries thoughts suggested that there is room for improvement.



There is a great connection between Presbyteries and the Synod!

This connection was especially important and done well during the pandemic.



Some feel that the Synod does not connect well with the average person in the pew.

Others feel that communication with colleges and universities has decreased.

Suggestions for improving the state of the Synod included:

- Provide more information about the work that the Synod is engaged with to the Presbyteries and churches.
- Increase knowledge about the workings and functions of the Synod and pass this information down to all levels of the church.
- Provide more direction for the Committee of Representation and SCOOP.

# Stepping back and reflecting

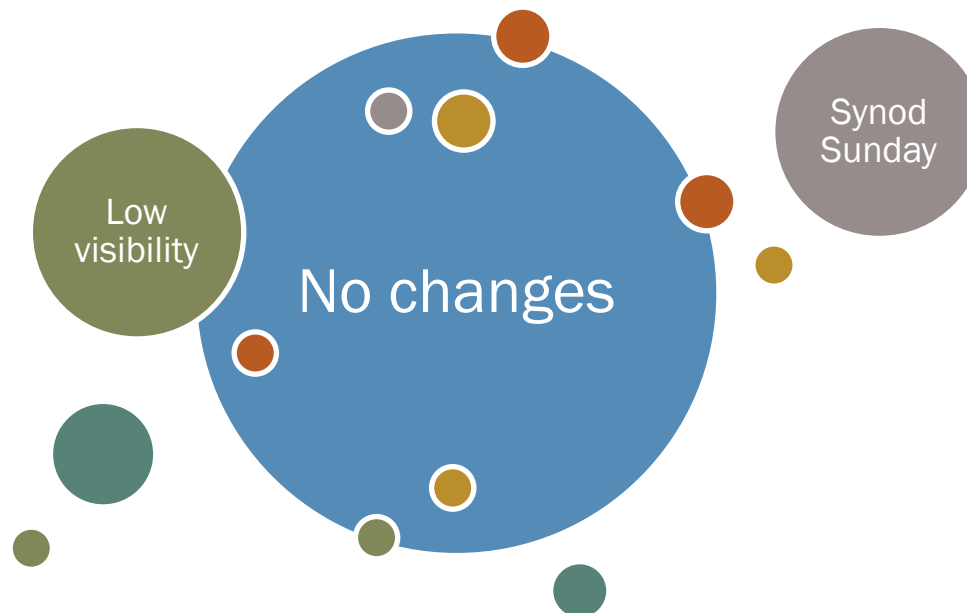
What is one thing that you think the Synod needs to stop doing?

**One** Presbytery thought that the Synod needed to stop engaging in low visibility and **one** other Presbytery thought that the Synod should stop doing Synod Sunday.

**Four** Presbyteries thought that the Synod did not need to make any changes.

**Two** Presbyteries responded that they did not think that they had enough knowledge about the Synod to answer this question.

Of the **ten** Presbyteries that responded to the questions, **two** did **not** respond to this question.



# Ministries of Importance

What are one-two Ministries of the Synod of the Sun that you think must be continued?

The Presbyteries thought that several ministries must be continued!

The highest-mentioned ministry was the Synod Presbyterian Disaster Response, with six mentions across the Presbyteries.

	Name of Ministry	# of Mentions
Other ministries mentioned included:	Synod Presbyterian Disaster Response	6
Presbyterian Women	Solar Under the Sun	4
Racial Equity Work	EP Forum	3
Sun Living Waters	Scholarships/Grants	3
Dismantling Racism	Boundary Training	2
Mission Opportunities	Synod Youth Workshop	2
Connecting with colleges and universities	Synod Imagine Event	2
	Communication Partnership Plan	2

# Needs of Presbyteries

What do you sense are the greatest, or emerging needs of your presbytery?

## Training for Presbyteries

- Sexual misconduct, PJC, COM, clerks, anti-racism, CP, and more.
- Expressed the need to continue regular typical training as well.

## Clergy

- Assist Presbyteries with efforts in recruiting clergy directly from seminaries.
- Increase access to qualified pulpit supply.

## Educational Events and Worship Experiences

- Increase the number of educational events specifically tailored towards pastors.
- Increase the number of educational events for all members of the Synod.
- Increase the number of inspirational worship service offerings by the Synod.

## Assistance

- Increase the assistance offered to Hispanic ministries.
- Provide greater financial support to smaller churches, to help them support their pastor and their pastor's family.



# Meeting the needs of the Presbyteries

How might the Synod of the Sun creatively and imaginatively collaboratively respond to the needs of Presbyteries?

## Support

- Create networks through which Presbyteries and Churches can easily access Synod information.
- Assist small churches that may be struggling with Presbytery salaries.
- Provide opportunities for engaging, inspirational and exciting events to boost connectedness and morale.
- Be an invested partner during times of transition or merger.

## Provide Information

- Improve the dissemination of information about scholarship support and provide perspective of what the Synod's focus is on the work that it completes.
- Provide workshops on technology/AI, preaching, worship, and communication.
- Provide training on and resources for mental health.
- Provide guidance on how to work across ecumenical lines.

## Recognition

- Celebrate and recognize the value of small churches.
- Create a task force or committee to specifically examine the needs of small churches.
- Maintain the already existing Ministries. They are important to the Presbyteries and churches.

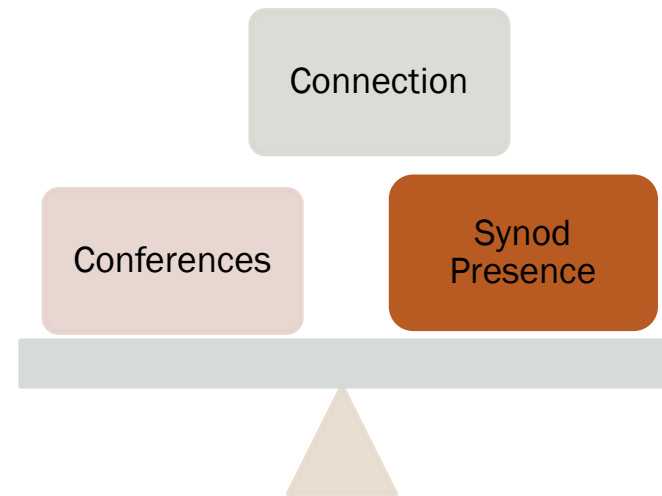
# Hopes and Dreams for the Synod 1 of 2

What are one-two hopes, dreams, or aspirations for the Synod of the Sun that could create more vitality and sustainability for our presbyteries than the Synod has delivered in the past?

Their hopes and dreams revolved around...

Hosting multicultural conferences and a conference for commissioned pastors.

The Synod becoming more connected to congregations, clergy more connected to one another, and increasing national connection on social justice, youth, healthcare, and education issues.



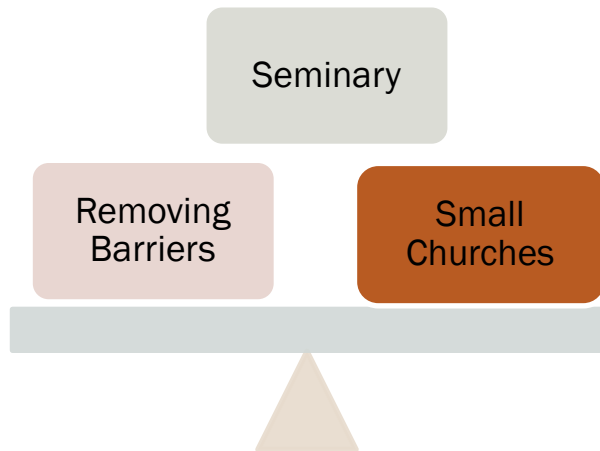
The members of the Presbyteries had several hopes, dreams, and aspirations for the Synod. Not all of those discussed are within the ability of the Synod to control, such as a revitalization of the Presbyterian faith nationally.

The hopes and dreams of the Presbyteries that the Synod can strive to engage with include hosting multicultural conferences, becoming more connected to congregations, and providing a sense of connection throughout the Synod surrounding issues of social justice, youth, healthcare, and education issues.

# Hopes and Dreams for the Synod 2 of 2

What are one-two hopes, dreams, or aspirations for the Synod of the Sun that could create more vitality and sustainability for our presbyteries than the Synod has delivered in the past?

Presbyteries had these hopes and dreams as well ...



Removing the barriers that divide the levels of the church through collaborative efforts, with the Synod serving as an inspirational and connective body.

Placing a spotlight on and making known what churches within the Synod are doing and increasing support for and recognition of small churches.

Being able to provide seminary debt relief/scholarships to seminary students who elect to go to small churches. Or create a mentoring program where seminary students can serve at 2-3 small churches and be monitored by an outside pastor.

How can the Synod best address these hopes and dreams?

The Synod can strive to fulfill these hopes, dreams and aspirations by engaging in collaborative work with the Presbyteries, congregations, and people in the pews. Giving special attention and recognition to small churches and their work. Finally, the Synod can strive to assist smaller churches and seminary students at the same time, by exploring avenues in which they can help relieve seminary debt or create a new mentoring program.

## What have we learned? 1 of 2

The Synod of the Sun is at a crossroads as it moves towards hiring a permanent Executive Presbyter. In order to hear equally from the presbytery leadership, a set of seven questions were developed and each presbytery was asked to hold a listening session to address the questions. The questions address their current understanding of the Synod, the ministries that should be continued, the needs of their presbyteries, how the Synod can help address those needs, and finally, their hopes and dreams for the Synod. Here is what was shared.

The Synod of the Sun is perceived as being helpful to the Presbyteries by:

- Helping them tackle projects that they cannot take on alone.
- Being a source of funding for the Presbyteries.
- Providing a gathering place for Mid Council leaders.
- Providing general support in times when there is no Presbytery leader.

Presbytery leaders commented that the most mentioned ministry is the Synod Presbyterian Disaster Response.

There are a couple of practices that the presbytery leaders think should be changed. One suggestion is to discontinue Synod Sunday. Another suggestion is for the synod to increase its visibility.

Presbytery leaders would like to know about the work where the synod is currently engaged. Knowing the synod's work would increase presbytery leaders' understanding the function and purpose of the Synod.

## What have we learned? 2 of 2

They also stated that increasing communication between Presbyteries, churches, and the person in the pew is important, with emphasis being placed on the importance of the connection between the Synod and churches.

The following items are what the presbyteries listed as their most pressing or emerging needs.

- Training on issues such as sexual misconduct and anti-racism training.
- Clergy recruitment
- Financial support for clergy and their families.
- Financial assistance for small congregations.

What actions do presbytery leaders hope the synod will consider and adopt that will address the hopes, dreams, and aspirations that they have for their synod?

- Host multicultural conferences
- Promote and improve connections for individual members, congregations, and presbytery leaders.
- Strive to remove barriers to communication.
- Focus on the small church, increase their roles or visibility in both the presbyteries and synod.
- Create new opportunities for the presbytery leaders to engage seminaries and seminary students as part of the presbytery's recruitment process.

Research Services helps the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) make data-informed decisions using surveys, focus groups and interviews, demographic analysis, and program evaluations.

We are social scientists with backgrounds in sociology, public policy, and economics. We serve congregations, presbyteries and synods, PC(USA) national agencies, and other PC(USA)-related organizations. Research Services is a ministry of the Administrative Services Group.

If you have any questions or would like a copy of this report, contact us at 502-569-5077 or [research@pcusa.org](mailto:research@pcusa.org).



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