
Synod Report

News of the Synod of the Southwest, Presbyterian Church USA

April 2010

Called by Grace

Jan DeVries will become General Presbyter of Grace Presbytery June 1

After ten years as Synod Executive/Stated Clerk of the Synod of the Southwest, the Rev. Dr. Jan DeVries will leave to accept the call to become General Presbyter for Grace Presbytery (Texas) beginning June 1.

A special meeting of the Synod of the Southwest has been called for Wednesday, May 5, 10 a.m. at Albuquerque First to act upon her resignation. A reception to thank Jan for her 10 years of faithful service will take place from 2 to 4 that same day. All are invited to come to say "hasta la vista" and express thanks.

The Presbytery of Grace overwhelmingly voted to call her as its next General Presbyter at a special meeting on March 25. Her predecessor at Grace Presbytery was the Rev. Dave Wasserman who is currently the interim executive for Grand Canyon.

Accomplishments During Ten Years

In thinking back over the past 10 years, Jan had this to say about accomplishments:

"The Synod knew what it *wasn't* supposed to be when I arrived, because of changes in structure and responsibilities between presbytery and synod, but the synod really didn't know what it *was to be or could be*.

"We began a simple conversation invited by then moderator Hilbert Schouten and urged by then council member, Rev. Jaime Quiñones, a process over several years refocused the synod's energies around six priorities, the two most obvious being leadership development and racial ethnic ministries. While structural changes were made, these were minimal and the focus was on ministry together among the four presbyteries and regionally.

"What's been the result of that? We have had an explosion of participation in synod-sponsored events – small ones or large ones. People now call or email and ask "when is the next one?" The expectation and standard the synod has set for presenting outstanding opportunities for shared learning is frankly one of the best across the denomination.

"In addition, I have been a steady and vocal advocate for Synod of the Southwest issues and people in every corner of the PCUSA. I have interpreted the diversity we experience here and the respon-

sibility the larger church assumed many years ago for ministries here, particularly racial ethnic ministries. At a time when those resources are decreasing rapidly from General Assembly Mission Council, the Synod of the Southwest never kept a nickel of those funds for itself (in the last 10 years during my tenure) and shared all of the funds with the four presbyteries.

"I am grateful to the Synod for its many ways of wanting people to be lifelong learners in the church. Here are just some of the events we've initiated or co-sponsored in the last 10 years:

- Unity and Diversity Event
- Spiritual Renewal Event
- Stewardship education event (both synod-wide and within each state and/or presbytery)
 - Gil Rendle on "Leading Change in the Church"
 - Multiple Preaching Events for pastors
 - "Holy Conversations & Holy Actions" for church clusters
 - Two border and immigration events – addressing issues which are steady for our synod in each of our presbyteries
 - The four-synod "Convenio" (partnership) with the Synod of the Sun and Sinodo de Noroeste and Sinodo de Israel in the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico. This is the first ever four-synod international partnership.
 - Mission education trips to the Waldensian Churches in Italy, the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches in Peru, with the Amity Foundation and the Christian Council in China, and now one planned for the Middle East will be the next one.

"Anyone who thinks that a small synod with almost no staff cannot generate ministry regionally hasn't been watching us!"

Challenges Ahead for the Synod

Looking ahead to the near future Jan thinks the Synod has several major challenges. She said,

"The Synod, with its four presbyteries, faces major changes ahead with the elimination by General Assembly Mission Council of mission partnership funds. The Synod was the recipient of the largest amount of funds of the nine-receiving synods. However, we have distributed 100% to presbyteries who now face planning for their ministries as that money ceases at the end of 2013. Despite knowing this for several years, the sense of urgency becomes greater every year as the money decreases as we move toward its cessation.



**Dora Martinez of Albuquerque (left)
and Jan DeVries**

“There is discussion emerging at the 219th General Assembly (2010) about the future of middle governing bodies (presbyteries and synods). I believe that Synod of the Southwest and its presbyteries can together initiate a conversation about what ministry regionally can and will mean into the future as there is the opportunity for increased collaboration among the four presbyteries.

“For some time I have said that this conversation is overdue in the PCUSA – we last seriously talked about middle governing bodies in the late 1960s and early 1970s at which point regional synods were formed and each presbytery had its own staff person. Now we are not alone in finding ourselves unable to sustain such a model. The two New Mexico presbyteries are leading the way in helping us think about shared staffing and how to do things cooperatively.”

Loving the Synod

Thinking about the Synod and memories over 10 years, Jan said, “I love this synod! This is a wonderful group of people in a remarkably



Jan with persons of the Middle Eastern Fellowship in Tucson, the Rev. George Bitar and Amgad Beblawi

beautiful part of the country. I have learned to travel its roads and give thanks to God for the opportunity to serve with you! I cannot tell you how difficult it is for me to leave this position.

“One of the delights of this position for 10 years is that the synod is small enough for me to know many pastors. Our 146 congregations are fewer than the number I will serve with in Grace Presby-

tery (one of our larger presbyteries). In my life, nothing has been as important as the opportunities to be in relationship to many people who have taught me about myself, about the church, about faith, and encouraged me in ministry.

“The diversity of Synod of the Southwest is a remarkable gift not only to our region, but to the larger PCUSA. I have been the beneficiary of so much learning about the cultural diversity. When I came here 10 years ago, I would never have spoken in Spanish at all, and understood very little. Today I am leaving with much more capacity to read and to listen, even if I am very timid about speaking. And you all have taught me Spanish pronunciation so that when I do say something, even I am not overly embarrassed!

“One of my favorite moments was speaking entirely in Spanish to the General Assembly of the National Presbyterian Church in Mexico two years ago. Of course this was fairly amazing just because I was a woman in an assembly which does not ordain women. But my language was steady enough that after I spoke, multiple people came up to me and started speaking to me in Spanish and I was without a translator. It occurred to me that I’d better get on with the next phase of language work – speaking it!

“A challenge for me in leaving is that I have been comparable to a “solo pastor” for 10 years. There is no single person with whom I can share all the things in my head that will make for a very smooth transition. So, meeting with the synod’s executive committee is a big start. And, the synod staff, especially Robin and Bob, are terrific resources for SSW.”

Preparing to Move to Grace Presbytery

As she completes her term in the Synod, Jan is beginning to look

ahead to days in Grace Presbytery:

“It is a great privilege to have been called as the general presbyter for Grace Presbytery, one of the five largest presbyteries of the 173 in the PCUSA. Grace is an area which covers much of central and northeast Texas, including west of Fort Worth. Some of its cities are Dallas, Fort Worth, Temple, Waco, Weatherford, Texarkana, Kilgore, Tyler, Sherman. There are many, many faithful Presbyterians there, and I am eager to meet them and to engage in ministry. You can learn more about Grace Presbytery through their website at www.gracepresbytery.org.

“Grace has, for several years, had a mission partnership with the Church of South India – a mutuality which has involved congregations in both Grace and South India in mission trips, exchanges and prayer. That will be a new opportunity for me to learn about a part of the world where I have not yet been.

“Like many presbyteries, Grace was accustomed to a large staff (14 full and part-time staff). It has experienced some serious financial issues in the last several years and has downsized its staff and ministries. Therefore, the search committee asked me on behalf of the presbytery to be prepared to engage the presbytery in a visioning process about ministry – something I hope we can begin within this calendar year.

“It is a privilege to follow two of my colleagues here who have also served Grace Presbytery – Jeff Finch as Associate for Pastoral Care (Jeff was interim exec in Sierra Blanca Presbytery and is now designated co-pastor at Belen, NM), and Dave Wasserman, former General Presbyter and now interim executive in Grand Canyon Presbytery.

“I leave Synod of the Southwest with many deep satisfactions, recognizing not all the work I came to do may be completed, but confident in many of the leaders of our synod. And, I go to Grace with expectation and trust that God will use me and teach me the lessons of ministry and equip me for the ministry to which I have been called.

“Thank you for 10 deeply fulfilling years of life together in the Southwest!”

A History of Service to the Church

Descended from several generations of Presbyterian and Reformed ministers, DeVries graduated from Hope College in Holland, Mich. She completed her M.Div. at Union Theological Seminary in New York while working full-time in the national offices of the former United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. She later earned her D.Min. at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago.

Before going to the Synod of the Southwest, DeVries served as associate executive of the Synod of Southern California and Hawaii; director of stewardship and training for the former UPCUSA; associate executive for program and leader development for Heartland Presbytery; director of seminary relations and recruitment for McCormick Seminary; general presbyter and stated clerk for the Presbytery of Northern Kansas; and associate stated clerk of the PC(USA) General Assembly in Louisville.

In its nomination announcement, Grace Presbytery’s search committee described DeVries as “a small powerhouse of a woman. She has a sharp wit and a wry sense of humor. She is a quick study and an accurate analyst. She has a great mind, and she loves to learn. She also has a great heart ... but even more, she loves Jesus Christ, and she loves his people.”

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