To: Presbytery Leadership Councils
From: Personnel Commission of the United Presbyteries of the Plains
Date: May 3, 2025
Re: Questions and Considerations related to the Iowa Way Forward Task Force Final Report of April 28, 2025

The members of the Personnel Commission discussed the Iowa Way Forward Task Force report at length and several considerations emerged that we wish to share with you. We believe that it will be helpful to take these matters into account as you determine our next steps.

As you are aware, the Personnel Commission is the only governance body that includes membership from all three presbyteries, and our responsibilities include working closely with all of the staff on a regular basis. We respect the work of the Task Force, we understand that they were privy to information that was not available to us, and we gratefully acknowledge the substantial effort required to develop their recommendations. At the same time, we think of the Commission as a key stakeholder on matters related to the shared staffing initiative. The questions the report raised for us may be shared by others throughout the presbyteries, and at the very least, we believe that discussing them will prove to be beneficial before decisions are made.

Our questions essentially fall into two categories: strategic vision and timing.

<u>Strategic vision</u>

The Task Force report stated or implied three reasons for abandoning the shared staffing model:

1. Lack of progress toward achieving the five ends proposed for evaluating the model
2. Financial sustainability
3. lack of trust and broken relationships between churches, presbyteries, pastors, and presbytery staff

The first two reasons are, in our opinion, strategic questions. As such, we wonder what process is envisioned to engage in genuine strategic planning, which is traditionally defined as planning that will align institutions and our missions with the environment in which we anticipate operating in the coming years. The Task Force properly defined this as a liminal time, which we believe underscores the need for such planning.

There are established and successful systems for undertaking strategic planning, but they involve significant effort to understand the external environment (economic, social, demographic, etc.) in terms of trends—as opposed to focusing primarily on internal operations and current conditions—as well as to understand and affirm our mission as churches and presbyteries. We realize that this goes beyond the scope of the Personnel Commission, but we feel that it is appropriate for us to raise this issue due to the obvious connection between strategic direction and the staffing model.

The members of the Commission are concerned that the proposed system—essentially returning the presbyteries to independent operations under three separate interim leadership

arrangements—does not constitute an ideal condition for this kind of planning. We do not presume to know whether the presbyteries are interested in coordinating efforts and engaging together in comprehensive strategic thinking. We can only say that based on our experience as a broadly representative Commission, we think that such an initiative is essential and has the potential to be transformative.

It is worth mentioning finances as one particular item that speaks to this need. The Task Force report did not include financial figures, but it appears on the surface that returning to three independent staffing models may in fact be more expensive. Whether or not that is the case, we think the evidence indicates that we must do something significantly different if we expect to be financially stable in the years to come—the economic and demographic trends of the recent decades make that abundantly clear.

The Commission cannot speak from our experience to the reference made in the report to the relationships among churches, presbyteries, and pastors. Concerns about presbytery staff have not been raised with us and we have heard only strong affirmations regarding the staff's performance. In any case, we believe that the question of strategic vision is paramount.

Timing

If the presbyteries do intend to work together on a plan for long-term prosperity under what are likely to be challenging environmental conditions, then we recommend continuing the shared staffing model for the near future and reorganizing job descriptions accordingly (e.g., emphasizing duties related to planning). It is very difficult to imagine engaging in strategic planning if we lose the talents, history, and knowledge of our current staff by the end of this year, and if the only committee that includes representation of all three presbyteries is dissolved at the same time. That will essentially mean the end of any kind of tri-presbytery coordinated effort for an extended period, and we believe that it will make transformative change more difficult to accomplish.

We should clarify that our reactions are not due to any shortcomings on the part of the Task Force, whose charge (as far as we can tell) was not to consider governance in general, but rather to evaluate the outcomes associated with a particular staffing model. They did their work diligently and professionally. Rather, we simply cannot see how to determine what our staffing should be—whether it's the current model, the proposed one, or any other alternative—without answering more fundamental structural questions about the future of our churches and presbyteries. In light of that, we think that continuing the current model for some period of time will be more productive and more economical, until we know once and for all whether the presbyteries are going to combine some aspects of our operations, and more importantly, whether we will have a unified vision for carrying out our missions in light of the conditions we anticipate experiencing in the years to come.

Finally, we must note the human considerations related to this recommendation. Our staff have not received feedback or had clear expectations regarding progress toward the five ends. The Task Force's work was helpful in understanding this shortcoming, particularly the lack of clarity about who was responsible for what (not exempting our own Personnel Commission from our

share of responsibility for this). If we knew our strategic direction and had developed a new staffing model aligned with it, then we could arrange an orderly transition in partnership with our high-performing staff. But that is not the case, leaving us with the somewhat abrupt conclusion that the experiment did not work so we will all go our own way. We suspect that everyone involved will agree that this is not how we would wish for things to end for the staff. At a minimum, more time and more clarity from the presbyteries about our expectations seems like a reasonable course of action, both in terms of compassion and the likelihood of successfully addressing pressing strategic questions—which will not go away with the dissolution of the shared staffing model.

We urge the Leadership Councils to extend the shared staffing model until such period as:

- The presbyteries have determined whether to combine our efforts and enhance our shared governance structures through collaboration; and if so,
- The presbyteries have developed a shared strategic vision, with a sustainable staffing structure designed to accomplish that vision; or
- The presbyteries have determined that a tri-presbytery partnership and shared governance structure is not desired and agreed to return to the independent operations of the past.

Thank you for considering our suggestions, and we will be happy to discuss this with you as you determine what should come next for the PC(USA) in Iowa.