



2023

www.synodne.org

DISCERNMENT TEAM
PHASE ONE REPORT

Abstract

This report is informed by the initial surveys and listening sessions conducted from April 2023 to date. The Discernment Team in this report worked to summarize the learnings from the many conversations with members of the Synod community. The sole purpose being to understand the impact of the current New Way Forward (NWF) Vision in three areas: strengths, connections, and transformation. The group is using the theological framework of Psalm 48:12-14 and the scripture's invitation to engage in a multi-year assessment process. This report is a preliminary summary of the group's year one findings.

Psalm 48:12-14 invites the reader to walk around, to notice strengths, the areas in need of maintenance, and the crumbling places. The report reflects the programs and processes that are holding strong, along with places that need shoring up or tearing down in order to make room for new structures and fortifications. Focusing on effective and efficient ways to do God's work, the NWF has led the Synod since 2013, to focus on creating diversity that points to God's Kingdom, developing networks, empowering young leaders, and encouraging ministry innovation. Creating unencumbered spaces for the Holy Spirit to work among gospel communities has become the tagline for the Synod's future direction. In many ways the NWF opened the way for more inclusive representation in the Synod. This effort is celebrated as one achievement of the forged vision to create a space for justice and repairing years of societal

harm and denominational incongruities and structures. This work is incomplete: voices are still muted and do not resound with the resonance of the Beloved Community that is Christ's will for the Church. The relationship between the Synod and its presbyteries is in need or healing. Clearly articulated policies and fairness in the administration of resources and grants, explicit communication among mid-councils with each other and the churches, a commitment to a shared vision and faithfulness in reinforcing our mission as a Synod to the presbyteries and the churches and back to the Synod are sorely needed. These are some of the themes articulated by the Synod community.

This report is but a preliminary document highlighting the path forward as God gives us discernment that we may understand not only God's statutes and decrees but Christ's mission and will for this regional body of believers, the Synod of the Northeast.

Table of Contents

p. 02

ABSTRACT

p. 04

INTRODUCTION

p. 05

CHANGES TO SYNOD
STRUCTURE

p. 06

MISSION

p. 07

NETWORKS

p. 08

THE PROCESS

p. 12

FINDINGS SUMMARY

p. 13

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

p. 08

THE PROCESS

Introduction

This report provides a preliminary evaluative summary of the New Way Forward (NWF) Vision of the Synod of the Northeast. Beginning in January 2023, the Discernment Team has engaged in a process of assessing the impact, strengths, connections, and areas of transformation resulting from the current vision adopted in 2013. Our theological guide is Psalm 48:12-14 “Walk about Zion; go all around it; count its towers; consider well its ramparts; go through its citadels, that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever. The Almighty will be our guide forever” is our theological guide.

The NWF Vision shifted the ministry focus of the Synod to less governance and a more missional organizational structure. At the time of the adoption of the current vision, the purpose was to exist to serve its presbyteries through resourcing, guidance, and the ability to gather partners on a larger scale. Drawing upon its regional size and diversity, the Synod’s aim was to provide valuable resources and opportunities for its presbyteries. The Synod also desired to provide creative and less encumbered spaces for innovation. With governance simplified and without the intense relational and governance demands faced by most presbyteries, the Synod wanted to be a place where creativity might be allowed to flourish. Four ministry areas were redesigned as follows:

- **Governance** basing its work upon the value of reduced governance.
- **Networks** basing work on creating open access to Synod resources in ways that promote innovation, passionate commitment and partnerships across our presbyteries.
- **Staffing** exploring how to ensure effective ways to live into this New Way Forward.
- **Finance** exploring how to both streamline and make accessible the financial resources of the Synod in the most effective and responsible manner.

Changes To The Synod Structure

- The Synod Assembly meetings are changed to every two years.
- On odd years, a Come to the Table Event is scheduled to promote faithful practices, showcase innovative new ministries and mission and networks, to provide quality relationship building/sustaining time among the members of our presbyteries and congregations.
- Each presbytery is invited to provide a slate of nominees from which the Synod Nominating Committee will elect Synod Council members who reflect the diversity we value.
- Other members of the Synod Council include Young Adult Advisory Delegates (YAAD) from one-third of our Presbyteries and one each from our Racial/Ethnic Caucuses and Presbyterian Women.
- Membership on the Synod Council is open to active members of Synod presbyteries.
- The Synod Commission consists of three working groups – Administration, Mission and Ministries, and Connectional Ministries.
- The Mission and Ministry Commission is empowered to meet three times a year to act on behalf of the Synod Assembly between meetings.

Mission

DIVERSITY

Includes the support and facilitation of Racial/Ethnic Caucuses, an annual convocation and new initiatives related to facilitating ways to become more authentic, multi-cultural, multi-racial, and inclusive.

EMERGING LEADERS

Includes support and facilitation of programs and initiatives that encourage and resource our younger leaders. Programs include the Early Ministry Institute (EMI).

LEADERSHIP

Includes current programs such as our Collegium for Missional Leaders on Presbytery staffs, Transitional and Interim Ministry Training, and other initiatives aimed at resourcing and equipping leaders for ministry and mission.

INNOVATION

Includes new models for ministry and mission, and areas of innovation such as new worshipping communities, congregation-based mission, and revitalization projects.

CAMPUS AND HIGHER EDUCATION MINISTRIES

Includes a renewed future partnership with Bloomfield College, as well as the development of new ministries utilizing the new, congregational based campus ministry program, and U Kirk developed by the PCUSA.

MISSION AT THE EASTWARD (MATE)

As one of our longstanding Synod originated and supported mission projects, MATE continues to provide innovative models and faithful practices.

Networks

This New Way Forward was based upon the value that our Synod is not called to provide programming but resourcing and that the gifts for this resourcing are best found within the giftedness of our members. The NWF has attempted to create resourcing that flows from the grassroots to the larger regional community where such resources are highly accessible and draw upon the passion and interest of our members.

The Synod in 2021 called a new Transitional Leader to provide leadership to the Synod, focusing first on listening in order to identify systemic problems and provide analysis and assessment of synod systems and organizational leadership structures. Additionally, the new leader would work to promote healing, understanding, and reconciliation as the Synod works toward a “re-booting” of the New Way Forward.

The Process

A multi-year process of discernment, listening, testing, and implementation is used to evaluate the current vision. The goal is to provide a thorough review of ministry initiatives and organizational cultural shifts that will catalyze development and transformation to ultimately address the needs of an evolving Church and society. If this process is successful, we will cultivate the underdeveloped capacity of the Synod, so we can more easily live into our eternal why. We are invited to consider God's abundance in the world and to seek to understand and identify where God has already been at work within the Synod.

In October 2022, the Synod Assembly elected a Discernment Team consisting of ten members. The elected group was vetted for their sense of discernment, participation in their presbyteries, and knowledge of organizational evaluation processes. The team held its first retreat in February 2023, for group formation and facilitators' training led by consultant Dr. Okokon Udo of LeaderWise and Soul Engineering Consulting.

In the initial stage of the evaluation process, data was collected through surveys and listening sessions. Two surveys were developed by Sean Payne, Ph.D., Research Services Office, Presbyterian Mission Agency. The Research Services office developed the survey questions and provided an anonymous summary of responses. The first survey received 44 responses that focused on two questions: 1). How has the New Way Forward Vision transformed presbyteries and congregations? 2). How has the current vision created connections, collaboration, unity, and a shared identity among the Synod?

The second Survey was fielded from July 27 to Aug 20, 2023, and was distributed via email by the Synod. There were 150 responses. The survey consisted of 26 Likert scale questions , 3 open-ended, and demographic questions.

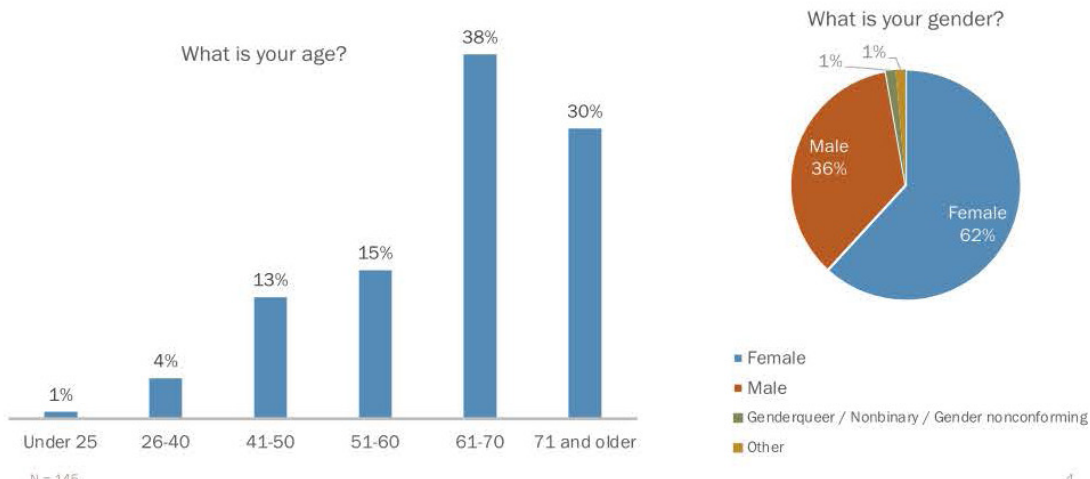
Respondents Sentiments



New Way Forward Survey

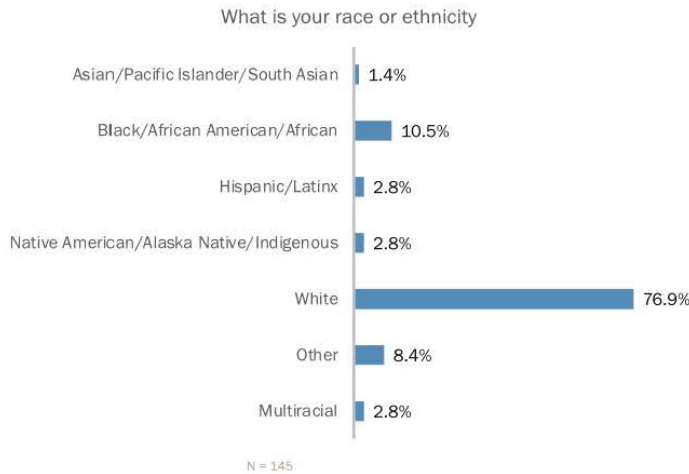
Survey respondents were mostly over 60 and a majority (62%) were female.

Most respondents (68%) are over the age of 60. Thirty percent (30%) are over 70 and 38% 61-70. There was only one respondent under 25, and very few (4%) between 26 and 40. Those aged 41-50 were 13% of the respondents and those 51-60 were 15%.



New Way Forward Survey

On race and ethnicity, the majority was White (77%) and there was a significant number of Black/African American responses (10.5%).



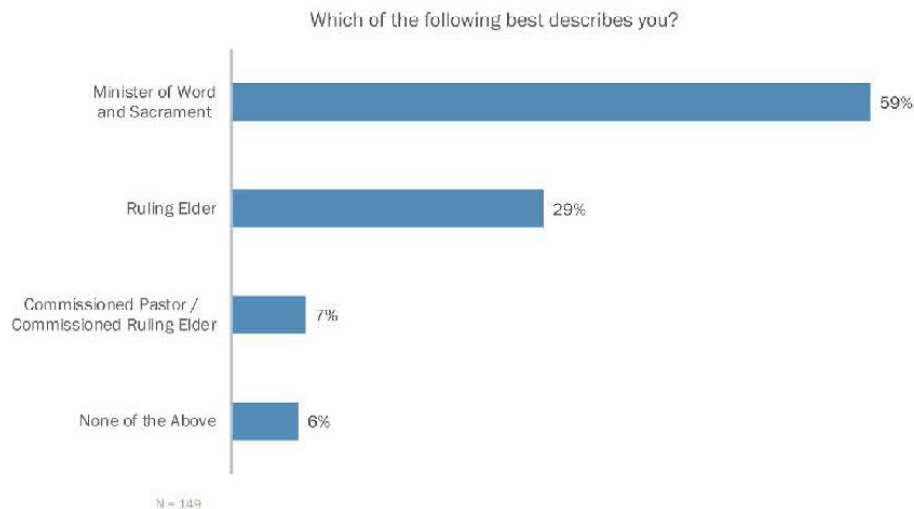
Overall, The respondents to this survey were more racially diverse than PC(USA) overall, which is 88% White, 4.4% Black / African American, and 1.6% Hispanic / Latinx.

The race and ethnicity survey responses are somewhat close to what churches in the Synod of the Northeast self-report, except for Asian respondents, who are under-represented in this survey.

New Way Forward Survey

Most respondents (59%) were Ministers of Word and Sacrament.

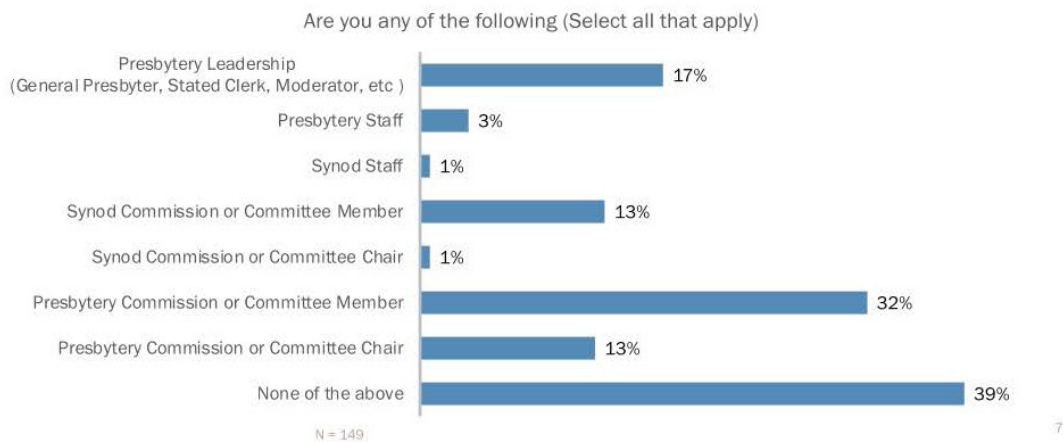
The next most common designation was Ruling Elder (29%), followed by Commissioned Ruling Elder (7%).



New Way Forward Survey

Most (39%) do not serve on a Presbytery or Synod committee or leadership position.

Thirty-two percent (32%) are Presbytery Commission or Committee members, 17% Presbytery leadership, and 13% Presbytery Committee Chairs. Another 13% serve on a Synod Commission or Committee as a member.

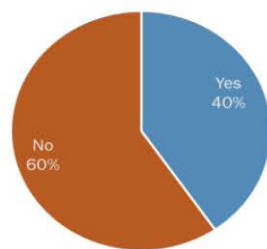


New Way Forward Survey

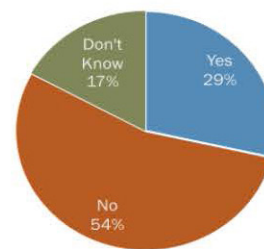
Forty Percent (40%) have participated in Synod networks or committees and 29% have received a grant

In the following analysis, we use these two categories to distinguish responses. Respondents who were participants or grantees were significantly more likely to respond positively in following sections.

In the last 2 years, have you participated in any Synod networks or committees?



Have you or your ministry ever received a grant from the Synod?





Findings Summary

- 150 respondents ranked their agreement or disagreement with 26 statements related to the New Way Forward Vision of the Synod of the Northeast. These statements fall into three categories: Fairness and Trust, Access and Connection, and Mission and Impact.
- The Synod scored most favorably in the category of Fairness and Trust and least favorably on Access and Connection. Respondents were, on average, neutral on Mission and Impact.
- Respondents who received a grant or who participated in Synod committees and networks ranked the Synod more favorably on issues of Access and Connection and Mission and Impact than respondents who were not grantees or participants.

What We Have Learned

The Discernment Team began conducting listening sessions in April 2023. The first listening session was conducted with the Ministry and Mission Commission. The sessions have included both in person and Zoom conversations. Below is the list of listening sessions completed:

- Ministry and Mission Commission - April 28
- One-on-One Interviews with the Leadership Team and Working Group Conveners - June
- Moderators, Committee on Ministry (COM), and Committee for Preparation of Ministry (CPM) - August 23
- Black Pastors - September 6
- Presbyterian Women - September 7
- Hispanic Caucus - November 4
- Pastors and Specialized Ministers - November 7
- Mid Council Leaders - November 9

Listening Sessions Scheduled for 2024

- The Coaching Network - January 10
- The Mediation Network - January 30
- New Worshipping Communities Pastors - February 6
- Commission Pastors - February 7
- Native American Caucus - March 4 or 11
- The Early Ministry Institute - May 20
- Young Adults - TBA
- Christian Educators and Camp Directors - TBA
- General Audience - TBA

The Discernment Team will conclude the initial listening sessions' phase of the evaluation process in 2024. The first series of Listening Sessions provided a baseline understanding of the Synod's impact –strengths, connections, and areas of transformation. Below is a summary of the Listening Sessions and our initial learnings about the impact of the current vision.

SUMMARY

Although the NWF vision articulated a new era of change in the Synod, the vision did not reverberate through the Synod for several reasons. One reason is the lack of dissemination of information and the need for repetitiveness of that information throughout the councils and the churches. The NWF vision never took hold of the members' attention because it never became embedded in the presbyteries and churches' conversations, dialogues, or nomenclature. The vision was not a regular part of the conversations at presbytery meetings, committee meetings like COM, CPM, Shepherding Council, and other committees and work groups in the presbyteries. Connections were not made between funding sources and NWF programs. Although grants were made in the \$700,000 range, recipients were unaware that awards received were related to the NWF initiative.

We heard anger, frustration, and distrust over how the Synod has treated people in the past. We heard angst and questions around wanting to know what the NWF was and how to articulate it but feeling unable. We heard confusion. Even when hearing the hurt and trepidation, there was disappointment because of a desire for a better relationship and relational norms within the Synod as a connectional church. Through conversations and surveys, participants identified the lack of trust caused by past administrative actions and the feelings of being excluded and devalued. Although this sentiment is true, historically, the Synod has been the place where marginalized and displaced peoples found resources. Marginalized groups want more transformation within the presbyteries for better representation and equity. One theme noted is mistrust and inequity in representation and power which are systemic issues in the Synod community.

The listening conversations reveal that the speakers could not separate the NWF vision from previous Synod structures. Those most able to understand and articulate any changes to the vision are leaders with direct relationships to the Synod as a commissioner, presbytery leader, or grant recipient. Non-grantees and non-participants report needing to know what the Synod is and what it does, according to the surveys and the listening conversations. There is a high lack of knowledge and confusion about the New Way Forward, and it is hard to tell if it is from a lack of communication or simply a lack of Presbyteries' connection to the Synod. If members are not grantees or participants in the Synod, they do not feel connected with the Synod. It is unusual for non-Presbytery level leaders to know about the Synod or what it does for churches in their region if commissioners and others do not communicate the programs, events, and activities. A lack of communication and or ineffective communication was a recurring theme expressed by almost all the groups interviewed. Additionally, the theme of a lack of enthusiasm toward the current vision resulted from wounded relationships and distrust among leaders. The surveys also demonstrate an inability to measure how grants and funding helped transform communities and presbyteries, and therefore, as one participant quipped,

“I don’t know what I don’t know.”

What the Synod does is its mission, and its mission is what it does. If a particular program or mission is mentioned, then members can concur that that program or mission is effective and productive. However, the overall impression and experiences dictate that the NWF was not known and that what was experienced was not a new way forward but an old way of doing business laden with backroom agreements, white supremacy, and bias.

The themes of the initial listening sessions and surveys communicate that the missional aspirations of the NWF missed the critical action of moving from articulation to embodiment. The vision was rejected by those who were disengaged because of broken trust, disenfranchisement, or lack of enthusiasm. The inability to incorporate the vision into the everyday language of the presbyteries and churches resulted from many of the presbytery leaders not grasping the vision, not buying in, or not seeing the value or relevance for their presbyteries. The surveys and listening sessions emphasized the past actions of Synod leadership maimed any attempt at NWF being a relevant and recognized vision and vehicle for the presbyteries. If members and churches are not connected with the Synod or its leadership, they feel as though they would not miss the Synod if it were gone. The experiences and perceptions of the members reflect the Synod’s actions, which became the vision; the vision of the NWF is entangled in the actions of the Synod so that there is a merging of the two that is difficult to disentangle or separate.

AREAS NEEDING REPAIR

The need for improving relationships is a consistent theme expressed by the groups interviewed. Second is the need to commit to diversity and full inclusion. The feelings of being unseen and invisible were expressed explicitly. The Synod has made bold steps to diversify and be a denominational leader in leadership development and inclusion. However, only partial success is achieved in these areas. A reshaping of power and shifts in representation and leadership is needed. Improved communication and resources produced in multiple languages are requested to support ethnic congregations. Healing the wounds of the past and a sincere apology are requested from those personally impacted by past action. Building networks of partnerships is requested in new forms.

STRENGTHS

One of the strengths identified by numerous listening participants is the emerging developing relationships in the Synod with presbyteries and churches when working together. An example is the New Jersey consolidation of presbyteries from 7 to 4; another is the growing transparency revolving around resources, recipients, programs, and access. Those members who received grants stated positive views of the Synod, and this was born out through the survey results. Current leadership is viewed as positive and transparent, creating a culture of fairness and equity in transactions and relationships. New developing relationships are partnerships, working towards a shared vision rather than transactional in nature. Conversation partners expressed this organizational shift as a strength

as the Synod begins to embody more fully the core values of collaborative relationships leadership and adaptability. The efforts of the Synod to be proactive in responding to the changing nature of today's Church are noted. The current leadership efforts to bring healing and reconciliation where woundedness and harm were once a reality is evident through rebooting the Presbytery Leadership Forum, engagement with caucus groups, building relationships with Native American siblings, and the ministry of presence across the Synod. The renewed emphasis on reframing the Synod's missional narrative is gaining positive feedback.

In its history, the Synod instituted ministry initiatives that inspired the denomination. Extending radical hospitality to all those called by Christ into Church leadership is a testament to our region's broad arc of theological perspectives. The staff and Commissions are working to embody the concepts of Matthew 25 and its three foci of congregational vitality, eradicating systemic poverty, and dismantling structural racism.

The Early Ministry Institute received exceptional praise as one of the best ministry programs provided by the Synod. The three-year ministry with new pastors serves as a strong foundation for new-in-ministry pastors teaching elders and commissioned pastors. The annual contributions by the Synod and partner presbyteries support the program.

CONCLUSION

Hope abounds because positive recurring themes were echoed throughout the listening sessions and pointed to in the surveys: growing transparency in processes and procedures, more diversity and inclusion, open and opening lines of communications: top down and bottom up as well as the reverse, connectional relationships that foster partnerships around common missions and purposes but not transactional in nature, easier and less encumbered access to resources, and the encouraging and support of wider participation from churches and members.

If rebranding and, intentional dissemination, and repetitive stamping of the brand occur on all levels, along with increased trust, respect, and buy-in, the revamped or restructured NWF can be successful and productive in its mission. The consensus is widely expressed that the future vision should include a new name and embodied practices that reflect the core values of a Matthew 25 religious body and one that is nimble and growing together.

The Synod of the Northeast is an organizational body being developed anew. In this season of transition, the Synod community can learn from past mistakes and forge new ministry initiatives that are timely and suitable for the current season of the Church. The work before us is an evaluation process that will clear the way for clarity and the discernment of a new vision for the new day.

The Discernment Team is thankful for the feedback provided in this initial phase of the evaluation process.

The SYNOD Discernment Team

Joseph Chu, Eastern Korean American Presbytery

Heather Dirk-Davidoff, Albany Presbytery

Holly Thompson, Long Island Presbytery

Jenny Lee, Coastlands Presbytery

Magalene McClarrin, Long Island Presbytery

Sabrina Slater, Geneva Presbytery

Eric Thomas, New York City Presbytery

Dakota Whittaker, Northern New England Presbytery

Okokon Udo, Consultant

SanDawna Gaulman Ashley, Transitional Leader



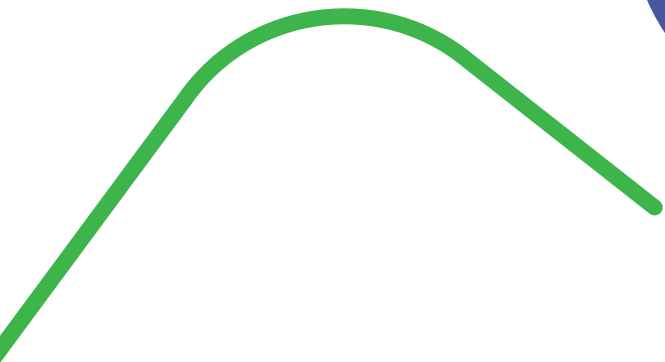
SYNOD OF THE NORTHEAST



5811 Heritage Landing Drive
Floor 2
East Syracuse, NY 13057

Phone
315.446.5990

Website
www.synodne.org



Synod of the Northeast
Presbyterian Church U.S.A.