



The Synod of the Covenant

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Cultivating the Gifts of Preaching Initiative (CGPI)
Report of Matthew J. Aragon Bruce, Director
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What is CGPI?

If you are unaware of what CGPI is (perhaps you are a new commissioner!) – CGPI is the “Cultivating the Gift of Preaching Initiative.” CGPI is funded by a Lilly Compelling Preaching Grant of 1.25 million dollars for five years. This is a new ministry of the Synod, beginning in January of 2024.

The aim of CGPI is to train 140 lay preachers from across the Synod and in all 11 presbyteries. We have a rather serious lack of trained preachers (albeit different from presbytery to presbytery) in the Synod. Not only are pulpit supply lists rather terse in many presbyteries, but of the ~650 churches in the Synod, nearly 200 are presently without an installed TE or CRE.

The cost of CGPI is about \$11,000 per participant. The grant covers the bulk of this. We ask that each participant pay \$250 personally and that their churches and/or presbyteries pay \$1000 for the entire 18-month program. Scholarships are available.

One of the most important things that I have found needs to be said about CGPI is this: When I first started this position as the CGPI director just over a year ago now, I viewed the purpose of CGPI to be something of an emergency stop gap, i.e., as a way to put warm bodies in pulpits while we figured out what to do (whether that be find new ways to train and recruit pastors for the Synod’s presbyteries, merge or close congregations, etc.). In sum our problem was a lack of people called to proclaim the Good News. It only took a few months of traveling across the synod (physically and digitally), to realize that we have no shortage of called people, but rather a lack of means to train and form them as preachers, and a lack of means to connect them where there is need. In sum, what I have found is that we have no shortage of REs and congregation members in our churches that are gifted and called to preach, what they need is some formal training in homiletics, exegesis, and reformed theology. CGPI serves to meet these needs.

2024 Statistics

In 2024 we admitted 21 participants into CGPI. These participants come from nine of the Synod’s eleven presbyteries and seven participate are BIPOC. One participant dropped out of the program, but she was our lone college student and dropped out because, in part due to her experience in CGPI, she plans to attend Seminary this Fall (I regard this as a win for all parties!).

The 20 current participants meet monthly in four different cohorts. Three of these cohorts are geographical (one for Michigan, one each for Eastern and Western Ohio, and one cohort which we call the “African Diaspora” has all the members are either African American or first-generation immigrants from an African nation; this cohort was made at the request of the participants). These cohorts are led by mentors (installed, seminary-trained TEs with significant experience as the regular preacher in a congregational setting) – three mentors come from the Synod and one (who leads the African Diaspora cohort) is a faculty member at Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary (JCSTS) in Atlanta (though he lives and pastors a church presently in NYC).

The major event of 2024 was the Alma Preaching Conference which kicked-off the program in June. This five day conference (Thursday afternoon – Monday morning) included a series of plenary lectures from Paul Roberts, President of JCSTs, and workshops from Alma College and JCSTS Faculty, and Synod staff (Chip Hardwick and Matt Bruce), and sermons from Rev. Roberts and our CGPI mentors. This conference will be an annual event and will be the start of the program for each “class.”

2025 Goals

Our goals for 2025 are:

- 35-38 new participants in five cohorts
- Participants from all eleven presbyteries (ideally at least three from each)
- Mentors from presently unrepresented presbyteries (current mentors come from Lake Huron, Scioto Valley, and Maumee Valley)
- To continue and deepen our ministry partnerships with Alma College and Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary.
- To “graduate” our first “class”
- To develop connections between CGPI and CRE/CP training

Present Activities (since the November Synod Assembly)

The major occurrence for present participants since November is the first in-person meeting since the June Conference. In January, each of the cohorts will gather in person for between 24-48 hours and have an intensive meeting (one group met in mid-December due to their schedules, one the second weekend in January, and the remaining two will meet the last weekend of January).

The application for the next “class” (we call this the Beta Cycle in house) has been open since mid-December. We are requesting that applications be submitted by March 1 (though we are able to take later applications). We are presently recruiting new participants and mentors (some of you may already have received a phone call and/or emails from me).

Looking Forward and Miscellaneous Items

- The 2025 Alma Conference will take place June 12-16.
- In the present cycle (2024-2025, Alpha) and the next (2025-2026, Beta) we are prioritizing admitting participants who have little to no formal training in preaching and will accept CREs/CPs only if there is space. However, going forward we are considering opening CGPI to CREs/CPs who may benefit from additional homiletical, exegetical, and theological formation.
- One of the added benefits of CGPI to the greater Synod is that our instructional preaching videos are available to the entire synod through our YouTube page.