

Minutes from June 13, 2017 meeting

In attendance: Mary Pat Brennan, Jill Feasley, Dan Hall, Sam Kalibala, Vicki Warren, Ferd Hoefner, Liz Hoge (left early), JC Cadwallader, Jessica Fisher

Devotion

Rev. JC Cadwallader opened the meeting with a devotion about the presence of the Spirit, including reading John 20:19-22 and the poem "Blessing of Breathing."

Agenda

Session reviewed the agenda and approved it unanimously with the addition of updates on the summer worship schedule and the Dine with Nine program. A question about how to present Session minutes to the congregation was also raised and it was decided this would be included in the larger conversation about Session leadership.

Omnibus Motion

The Omnibus Motion was moved, seconded, and approved unanimously.

Summer Worship Schedule Update

JC reported that the worship committee has not yet met, but based on recent survey results, summer worship will continue at 10am on Sundays.

Dine with Nine Update

The Dine with Nine meals have opened up larger conversations and feedback about the culture at TPPC. JC shared that several members expressed interest in attending the dinners, if session members were not present. Options of preliminary events or events without session members were discussed, but the Session decided these were not the best path forward.

Session discussed the purpose and role of Dine with Nine. They recognized the value of community conversation while also acknowledging that some people are in need of healing and pastoral care before coming to the table.

There was a Dine with Nine last week that went well. Dan and JC attended. Dan shared that in the conversation, frustration and anger were expressed about Mark's leaving.

It was clarified that all those expressing disinterest in Dine with Nine with session members present have accepted further conversation and care from JC. The Session noted this as a sign of hope and connection.

Meals will continue to be planned, with at least one elder present, as scheduling allows.

The Leadership of the Session

As the conversation shifted to a broader discussion of Session leadership, it was noted that Session members still have questions about the history and current state of feelings of frustration and anger. Last fall's conversations after church were helpful in addressing some of these questions, but not all elders were able to participate.

JC shared her some of her experiences at TPPC: coming in knowing there was some conflict and then exploring that conflict in her first few months. She focused on understanding the systems at play in the church's culture, what and where tension exists in those systems, and how people are feeling about the tension or conflict. She has heard many different experiences and appreciates the honesty and openness of the community.

JC sees great hope in the fact that people want change here and believe new habits are possible. She sees great commitment to stay together as a church. Of the ones who have reached out to her, no person has said that TPPC should close or that they will definitely leave. People want this church to be a life-giving experience.

JC noted that living in the neighborhood has helped her greatly to learn about the larger TKPK community and culture. She sees passion and activism, which are strengths, but bring challenges. She believes that some of these challenges have impacted TPPC's culture and outlines her observations and thoughts further in her Moderator's Report.

Moderator's Report and Session Responses

At this point in the conversation, JC read the Moderator's Report aloud, one section at a time and opened up conversation between each section. This was the first time the Session saw the report.

(NOTE: The text of the Moderator's Report is included below in *italics*, with summary of the conversation in between each section.)

JC also introduced a communication tool called "Fist to Five" to help gauge elders' reactions to what was read. In this tool, participants rank their response on a spectrum from a closed fist to 5 fingers of support:

Closed fist - No. A closed fist is a way to block consensus.

1 finger - I have major concerns but am open to discussion.

3 fingers - I'm not in total agreement but I feel comfortable enough to let this proposal pass without further discussion.

4 fingers - I think it's a good idea and will work for it.

5 fingers - It's a great idea and would like to take the lead when we implement it.

Whenever this tool was used in the conversation, tallies are noted below.

I. Executive Summary

After listening to congregation members for nearly six months--and intentionally asking more probing questions for the past two months--I have witnessed a consistent pattern of deeply rooted distrust within the congregation, and toward the Session in particular. Many members of the congregation--both Session and lay--interact with a posture of defensiveness and an unwillingness to listen to one another.

This faith community is important to everyone in it, but given the congregation's current fragility and historical volatility, few--if any--feel able to share their hurt, anger, or confusion. In order for the membership to rebuild relationships (or in some instances build relationships for the first time), it first must address this systemic distrust.

There was a general consensus of agreement with JC's observations about distrust in the congregation

at a systemic level. Elders also noted observing or feeling defensiveness and unwillingness to listen to others. The group discussed some of the historical origins of this distrust, looking at Mark's departure but also seeing a historical trend of pastors leaving every 7-10 years over the last 65 years. Some noted "rumblings" of conflict and then an "explosion" in the 2015 Annual Meeting and in one of Mark's last sermons. Others were surprised at the depth and length of the tension. It was expressed that many in the congregation weren't aware of tensions before Mark's sermon, but for others it gave words to the tension. Some of the content of the sermon was inappropriate. No alternative view or perspective was offered, and so distrust grew.

The Session began to ask how to move forward, realizing that the conflict goes beyond one person's actions. It was noted that attempts at healing and shifts in mission focus have not been effective.

II. Congregational Culture

The congregation is comprised of protesters by nature. Each member has a strong sense of justice and feels a call to labor for peace in the world. This is consistent with the culture and identity of the Takoma Park neighborhood as well. This passion, this love of justice, this calling to peace is the congregation's greatest asset, but it also leads to challenges. Activists are accustomed to pointing fingers at injustice but have less practice listening to others, being truly open to differing opinions, or compromise. And we see these traits--both the good and the bad--in the very DNA of Takoma Park Presbyterian Church.

As a result, a pattern has developed over time at TPPC wherein church decisions are made by individuals or a small group of members--typically related to mission or social justice priorities. The vast majority of the congregation feels disempowered, voiceless, or, at the very least, made to feel that their buy-in is unimportant or unnecessary. With each disempowering decision, a few members leave the congregation, and the bulk of the work and maintenance of the church is shouldered by a few. Though these commitments have been life-giving to some and are, indeed, examples of Christ's love in the world, they have caused feelings of hurt or disempowerment to others. And a by-product of this individualistic/small group culture is that many members of the congregation have never had the opportunity to build meaningful relationships within the church.

The most recent and acute manifestation of this church's deep-seeded distrust was the 2015 annual congregational meeting and its fallout. Following the confusion, anger, and opacity surrounding the congregational meeting and Mark's departure, many in the congregation have been left nursing wounds and harboring resentments against one another. Some members understandably have sought to sew up the wounds by returning to familiar habits. But to bring about the genuine healing that will enable this congregation to work for justice and peace into the future, members of this congregation first must rest and reconcile.

Again, there was general agreement with JC's interpretation of the activist culture. Session sees this exhibited in individualism, small groups, and smaller leadership. An alternative view of apathy, not activism, was expressed citing a sense of talk but little engagement except for a small group of people.

It was expressed that about 30% of the congregation has carried the work of the church. JC reported this

can be common in churches, but usually the individuals within the 30% change over time. This does not seem to be the case at TPPC.

Questions over how decisions are made were raised as well. There may be a pattern of Session, or other groups, making decisions for the whole congregation without input, and then receiving no support. Situations surrounding the kitchen and mission budget changed may be a part of this pattern, causing hurt feelings.

JC refocused the conversation from retelling events to looking at the spiritual well-being of the congregation. In the discussion, it was noted that in the last pastoral search, the PNC specifically looked for a spiritual leader, rather than someone to focus on social justice, which was already a strength of the church. There were mixed feelings about how the last pastor filled that role, and whether or not Session supported spirituality as a growth area. Some felt pain and frustration at that process and are ready to move forward, but fear getting stalled just “talking” about it. It was raised that long term pain can lead to a loss of respect for others, and a loss of respect can lead to poor behavior – a symptom of the larger issue.

The situation was compared to one needing a 12-step recovery process. How can the Session and the congregation take accountability and get out of the rut of poor behavior?

Discussion came back to spirituality, emphasizing that as the element that separates church from other protest/activist movements. A lack of spirituality can lead to burn out. But spirituality can't be solely developed by the pastor and must have member leadership and participation. In church models, TPPC is a family-size church, not pastor-centric. TPPC history was described as family-style for 30 years, followed by 9 years of pastor-centric style.

Again, the question of how to move forward was raised. Session identified needs of hearing new perspectives, helping those hurt by Mark's departure to heal, and to bring a spiritual revival. In each of these, relationships need to be built or rebuilt. JC identified the need for space to talk about the hurts of the past, but to also be moving forward as a community.

Some anxiety was expressed about people not coming to planning meetings in the past and therefore not expressing their voice. It was suggested that a no-show is a voice, and may indicate a lack of energy around a subject. This doesn't mean there isn't passion, but that people are tired. What is the leadership role in that context? How are passions identified and buy-in gathered?

Discussion turned to how this dynamic affects Session. A lack of trust in Session indicates disagreement with Session decisions. Recent struggles to nominate additional elders also indicated resistance to joining the board because of distrust.

III. Working toward Reconciliation and Restoration

It is vital that the membership of TPPC reconcile its past in order to enliven a new spirit of God's community moving forward. TPPC will survive as a church only if the congregation comes together as the body of Christ, loving and serving God, neighbor, and one another. If the membership of TPPC continues to act as individuals or small cliques, TPPC will not survive as a light of love and peace in the world for generations to come.

The most immediate goal is to break down unhealthy institutionalized behaviors and instead focus on healing: healing both the acute pain experienced in the recent past as well as the pain rooted in unhealthy behaviors over years or decades. Healing will require discipline, rest, humility, and time. It also will require intentionality and openness in getting to know one another.

Elders ranked their response using the Fist to Five scale:

0- 0
1- 1
2- 1
3- 1
4- 1
5- 2

It was noted that this matches the Presbytery's previous recommendations. Session also thanked JC for her frankness and were glad that she feels comfortable discussing this with leaders in a clear way. JC offered that she tries to listen with a non-judgmental ear and that the Session is called to do this, too.

Session named that they have become separate from the congregation in experiences and in decision making. There was strong desire for others to feel their voices are heard.

IV. Session Leadership to Break Historical Patterns of Distrust

Moving forward the church must take meaningful steps towards healing, reconciliation, and relationship building, because merely tinkering with established patterns will do little to heal decades of ingrained behavior. As leaders of this church, the Session has the opportunity to reflect the radical servant leadership that Christ modeled for us. In doing so, the Session can offer an earnest sign of good faith to the congregation and set the church on the path of meaningful reconciliation and restoration.

Trusting in God's transformative power to redeem and reconcile and as a sign of commitment to the process of healing, reconciliation, and reformation in the Takoma Park Presbyterian Church, I invite the Session to consider the following path forward.

- a. Invite the Commission on Ministry of the National Capital Presbytery ("COM") to appoint a Reconciliation Commission ("RC") to fulfill the administrative functions of the congregation. Administrative functions include: collaborating with the Interim Pastor to provide that the Word of God may be truly preached and heard, that the Sacraments may be rightly administered and received, and to nurture the covenant community of disciples of Christ (G-3.0201).*
- b. Invite TPPC committees to suspend non-essential activities so that energy can be focused on the healing process and relationship building.*
- c. Once the RC is appointed, all currently serving Ruling Elders of TPPC will submit a letter of*

resignation from service on the Session and as chairs of committees. Stepping down from roles of authority will equalize all members of the church during this period of rest, reconciliation, and restoration.

- d. *A consultant in Healing and Reconciliation Ministries will be hired (with supporting funds from the Presbytery) to assist the Interim Pastor, RC, and congregation during this season.*
- e. *When the congregation discerns a collective healing of past wounds and openness to the Spirit into the future (at least, but not restricted, to 12-18 months), the congregation will elect a new Nominating Committee and then a new Session.*

JC noted that this is a bold proposal and that the decision is completely up to the Session. Session agreed this was a bold proposal, never done before at TPPC. The role of the RC was compared to a company going into receivership. Fears were raised about the shift in power being a shock to the congregation. It was noted that with the right communication, this could be a fresh start for TPPC.

Session had questions about how this would work:

How does this work practically? What does the RC do?

JC reported that the RC would be made up of members of National Capital Presbytery who volunteer (no cost to TPPC). The RC would take over administrative functions of session including tasks such as management of property (in conjunction with the Property Committee), financial oversight (in conjunction with the Finance Committee), and personnel matters (in conjunction with the Head of Staff and Personnel Committee) so that elders spend their energy on reconciliation. Specifics of the management of the building, finances and personnel would be negotiated with RC as the process begins. This brings elders to the same level of the congregation, allowing the consultant to come in with even playing field.

What is the role of the consultant?

JC reported that the consultant would work with the pastor. The pastor would continue pastoral care, preaching, and teaching. The consultant would manage the reconciliation process. Both roles are needed as this is too much work for one person to do effectively.

Could we hire a consultant without bringing in the RC?

JC noted this is a possibility, but may not address the issue of distrust.

Has JC talked to Presbytery already?

JC reported that she has talked with the Commission on Ministry (COM) and they have been very supportive. (JC noted that she has not talked with anyone in the congregation about this, naming that the Session needed to hear it first.)

Has an RC worked in the Presbytery?

JC reported it has never been tried in NCP, but has been successful in other areas of the denomination. Unlike other types of commissions, COM would be coming in to support TPPC, with the goal of returning care of the church to Session. This is not a takeover; the church has agency in the process.

What are non-essential activities?

JC suggested, for example, that Personnel's work to revise their manual, job descriptions, and staffing patterns, while needed, could happen in the future. There would still be a Personnel Committee to support the pastor and staff by doing annual reviews and relational check-ins during this process. Christian Education would continue. Other items would be discussed. How will each activity build relationships and trust during this process?

How would this affect the search for an installed pastor?

JC suggested a timeline for this process of 12-18 months and then entering the PNC process 6 months after that.

What are the next steps?

To keep the conversation moving forward, JC suggested the Session meet with COM members to answer more questions. This will be planned for June 27. The Session could then meet again or go to the congregation for input. As elected leaders, Session has the power to initiate this process. Session's act of resignation would speak volumes to their commitment to the healing reconciliation of this congregation.

Meeting evaluation

At the end of the meeting, elders felt:

- excited about new ways and new actions,
- needing to think it through more
- liberated
- impressed, but with some anxiety about relationship with Crossroads and ongoing legal matters
- pondering

Session adjourned with prayer at 9:40 p.m.

Minutes taken by Jessica Fisher