

Minutes from June 27, 2017 meeting

In attendance: Mary Pat Brennan, Jill Feasley, Dan Hall, Sam Kalibala, Vicki Warren, Liz Hoge, David Olson, JC Cadwallader, Stephen Smith-Cobbs, Karen Chamis, Jessica Fisher

Devotion

Rev. JC Cadwallader opened the meeting with a devotion about the Body of Christ, reading from 1 Corinthians 12. Group reflections included:

- I don't have to know all the answers
- When one part of the body is sick it affects the other parts
- Different kinds of talents are valued
- Reminder of E. pluribus Unum – out of many one
- “Made to drink from the same stream” – does “made” mean “must” or “created to”?

Introductions

National Capitol Presbytery representatives Stephen Smith-Cobbs (Committee on Ministry Chair) and Karen Chamis (NCP's Director of Congregational Development and Mission) introduced themselves, both coming to offer support. Karen noted being at TPPC a year and a half ago for the Holy Cow/ CAT Scan interpretation.

Agenda

Session reviewed the agenda and approved it unanimously. Like the last meeting, the question was raised on how to share minutes with the congregation. It was decided this would be a part of the larger conversation of the meeting.

Omnibus Motion

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

The Leadership of the Session – Part 2

Using the “Fist to Five” tool, Session ranked their current feelings on the proposal made at the meeting two weeks ago:

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

JC invited reflections from elders:

- Some elders had sent questions by email and JC replied to those by email.
- Anxiety was expressed about whether the congregation would feel disheartened by Session stepping down. Would people leave and come back after the reconciliation process was over?
- The idea of only some members of Session resigning was raised, arguing that only elders directly involved in decisions made in 2016, or leading up to then, should step down.

- When new ideas are offered, how do we respond in a way that clearly states that “I can’t take that on” without dismissing the idea entirely. How do we re-learn to communicate with each other? Can a consultant help with that? Are Session and committee meetings an opportunity to practice those skills? Would we lose those opportunities in this proposal?
- Power structures matter and things go wrong with an imbalance of power. But, would those who don’t trust session see resigning as walking out?

JC redirected the conversation away from trying to predict the congregation’s response. She encouraged the group to have more confidence in their communication skills.

JC also noted that in a secular environment, a leader who is not respected can resign and the company continues on with new leadership. There is some sacrifice, but forward movement. In the church, we function differently and need a mechanism for grace and healing. What would a few people resigning look like? Would that offer grace and healing? Or would it feel punitive? Reconciliation is harder. It would be easier to not go through process.

Conversation continued establishing that the situation is not clear-cut enough for some to take responsibility and others not to. It was noted that the larger issues are the anger around Mark’s departure, the sadness felt by those who had profound relationships with him, and the historical trend of pastors with shorter than average tenures.

Another elder reflected on her initial reaction to this proposal of feeling her heart lifted. This would be a great leap of faith. Many messengers have repeatedly identified the deeply entrenched tension, but the congregation refutes this as an “outsider’s view.” Karen and Steve come not as outsiders, but as a part of the connectional church. Not trusting Session goes against Presbyterian theology. For Session to acknowledge the issues and resign would be a profound statement of leadership. Anxiety will need to be managed, but our constitution makes provision for these kinds of steps to be taken. If the alternative is business as usual, that’s not what we’re called to. Session is called as leaders, not just managers. This proposal holds the promise of a time of gestation, to become something new by letting go. We don’t know what will happen. It’s a leap of faith and that is exhilarating.

The importance of communicating the plan clearly to the congregation was emphasized again, along with some anxiety about the plan being interpreted as abandonment on the part of Session. There needs to be a clear plan for how this process will end and a new Session is elected, and who can be elected (can current or previous elders be nominated?). This isn’t abandonment, but a clear step of leadership taking responsibility in naming that the current system isn’t working and trying something new, including hearing from the congregation directly. There was agreement that this is too big of a decision to make alone.

JC and Karen reiterated that these feelings of distrust and the systemic tension aren’t coming out of nowhere. There is data from the 2011 listening campaign and the 2015 CAT Scan. The CAT Scan reported 50% of respondents feeling that goals were not being met by leadership. There has been a 5% decline in membership for a number of years. Under the conflict management section, TPPC came in the 12th percentile for being “solved by mutual effort” (not clergy). Other indicators point to systemic conflict.

Karen emphasized that Presbytery's role in this process is to "hold" the congregation in a supportive role, not as a "take over." That role allows Session to step down and remove the power differential within the congregation. The Reconciliation Commission would hold the day-to-day admin of the church. Only the congregation can do the reconciling work, anyone can pay the bills. As a connectional church, Presbytery hurts when TPPC hurts. Presbytery hears the pain here and want to help bring wholeness.

Stephen echoed the power of a Session stepping down to work alongside the congregation in reconciliation. He also noted this is a new dynamic in the Presbytery for a church to ask for an RC rather than for the Presbytery to bring an Administrative Commission to a church. RC members will have gifts of healing, be heartfelt, and be spirit-filled and serve as placeholders for the ongoing work of the church. Systemic issues take time to deal with and are hard, but this process could be a gift to the church.

The observation was offered by an elder that things seemed to be going better since JC was hired, so this seems like a shocking proposal. JC noted that the healing can't be pastor centric and that as interim, she is in a temporary role. The congregation needs to address root causes of this distrust.

Stephen noted that with the Session taking the initiative to ask Presbytery for this, not the other way around, indicates that things are not in dire straits. This process can work and be a paradigm shift because things are not dire.

Concerns were raised that those who worked with Presbytery in the past, especially around Mark's departure, didn't feel supported and those feelings may impact this process. Karen acknowledged those feelings and offered that the RC would be a different set of people. Some reconciliation with Presbytery may be needed.

JC asked for more questions.

The idea of bringing in a consultant, but not having Session resign was brought up. How can we resign when we have a hard time filling Session seats? How can we trust it will be filled later? Karen and JC noted that reconciliation is not passive work, but is active and takes energy. Resigning from Session and allowing the RC to take over admin work, gives current elders time and energy to participate in the reconciliation process. Removing the power structure will also help the reconciliation. This work will include community and relationship building.

How does that play out? JC offered discernment questions like, how do we be more relational, less task based? How do we leverage/orient worship to build relationship? Community life? Mission? Focusing on building relationships versus promoting a cause. Individual/letter writing campaigns vs. group activity that lets people get to know each other. This is not naval gazing and requires new things.

Could this be called community building rather than reconciliation? That sounds more energizing and appealing.

Karen gave the image of Session taking a sabbatical to have time and energy to become beloved

community. Stephen offered that TPPC is already a beloved community but needs actively *be* a beloved community, living out 1 Corinthians 12, for instance.

What are essential and non-essential tasks?

JC referred to some of her answers to the emailed questions and emphasized the need to focus on relationship building as the “essential” items. Non-essential items are things that don’t need to be addressed right now. For example, the Personnel Committee reviewing all policies doesn’t need to happen now, but supporting staff with annual reviews does.

Stephen offered that the role of RC (called Administrative Commission in the Book of Order) is to be the Session. What is essential for the AC to do? To reframe the work of the congregation as building up of community. Purposeful fellowship will help with that.

If Session is dissolved, who decides when session is reinstated? JC referred to #9 in her emailed responses. This process can’t be indefinite. Before resigning, Session would set tasks and timeline for RC. The congregation will discern together, through quarterly or monthly congregational meetings to check-in. The congregation will decide to elect a nominating committee, in conjunction with RC, using metrics established by RC and Session.

Karen shared a story of an AC in her last presbytery in which in a very different situation, the AC became a healing agent and connection between the church and presbytery. Similarly, TPPC could be a model of an AC/RC bringing healing in NCP. Stephen echoed this hope and the goal of a newly elected Session to pick up leadership.

What do elders do day after resigning? How do elders engage in reconciliation? Stephen offered that in the sabbatical model, a plan is made before starting. Those goals and commitments would be shared with the congregation. It’s hard to get more specific before the consultant comes in with their tools and style and gets to know TPPC. One potential consultant is the Lombard Mennonite Center, but Karen will research more. The process will include having the consultant on site, listening sessions, recommendations, stepping back and assigning homework, reporting back to RC. It’s a dance.

The need for People of Color to be included in the reconciliation process, including on the RC was noted.

Sabbath time may be better language than sabbatical, the elders can’t leave. After resigning, they commit to staying to do the work as active participants in a congregational process. This involves: engaging in listening, going to meetings, up building of the community. Going beyond your current circles. Leadership by example.

Payment for consultant will be shared between Presbytery and TPPC. There is some expectation of buy-in from TPPC.

The timeline will put PNC on hold until after Session is reinstated. Pastoral needs will be met by the interim pastor.

The question was raised: What if the congregation says no? Anxiety was noted over TP's culture of resistance to authority.

Karen referred back to documents showing goals and recommendations have not been followed through on yet. Stepping down as servant leaders to join the congregation marks this as a #1 priority.

Stephen offered that this not to blame, but recognition of the power of the system. System change is hard. In his experience, coming into a church after clergy misconduct, it took 5 years of just building trust. The system bites back when you try to change it. It's not personal, but a system that has developed.

How will people trust us in this process? Session must get buy-in from the congregation through clear communication of a vision and plan. If the congregation is not onboard, we come back and adjust the plan and present it again. It's Session's decision to resign.

Next Steps

JC appreciated the honest conversation for 2 meetings, 2 hours each and takes it as an encouraging sign. Valuing in person communication and group processing, the group agreed to not talk about or email questions before the next meeting. This information is confidential until presented to congregation.

Consensus that the status quo isn't working. Reconciliation is needed. Now need to figure out how to go from here, which is exciting. This proposal isn't set in stone. Session will make a plan, go to congregation, and get input.

A Q&A document should be developed to help as a resource.

Next meeting on July 11 with goal of deciding what the path will be. Elders were asked to think about what they would like to see the plan be, come open to the spirit, and shape it into one vision together.

Should we have potential members of RC come to the next meeting? Fist to five: 0-0 1 -3 2-0 3-1 4-0 5-2

JC and the Session expressed gratitude to Karen and Stephen for coming.

Session adjourned with prayer at 9:50 p.m.

Minutes taken by Jessica Fisher