

To: The Presbytery of Detroit  
From: The Administrative Commission for the Fort Street Presbyterian Church  
Date: February 28, 2018  
Subject: Final Report

The Commission for the Fort Street Presbyterian Church (AC) was created at the recommendation of the Committee on Ministry (COM) by the meeting of the Presbytery of Detroit on April 22, 2014.

*Recommend that Presbytery appoint an Administrative Commission to be placed in Fort Street Presbyterian Church, Detroit, to settle the disorder as per the Book of Order. The time frame would be 24 months that could be extended at the request of the Administrative Commission. The Administrative Commission should report back to Presbytery in a regular and timely fashion. The Administrative Commission shall have the following duties and powers:*

- 1. To call congregational meetings for appropriate purposes as necessary.*
- 2. If, after a full investigation in which Session is afforded full opportunity to be heard, the Administrative Commission determines that the Session cannot exercise its authority, or is unable or unwilling to manage wisely the affairs of the church, to assume original jurisdiction over any or all functions of the Session, pursuant to G-3.0303e. This shall include assuming control over any Session committee or task force.*
- 3. If, after the pastor, Session, and congregation have been given notice and given full opportunity to be heard, it (the AC) determines that the church's mission under the word imperatively demands it, the Administrative Commission may recommend the dissolution of the pastoral relationship to Presbytery, pursuant to G-2.0904.*

The membership included The Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Downs, Elder Dixie Elam, Elder Harold Ellis, Elder Jean Loup, The Rev. Dr. Louis Prues, and The Rev. Donald Wright.

It is important to recognize that issues of conflict within the Fort Street Church had been reported to COM for more than ten years. Various COM attempts to work with the Session and Pastors to resolve these conflicts were unsuccessful. This lack of success as well as the importance of this congregation to the Presbytery led to the motion to create the AC.

A week later the Chair of COM, The Rev. Philip Reed, convened the group, presenting a charge to guide the AC's work:

*Fort Street Presbyterian Church is a vital and important witness of God's grace, love, and reconciliation at the heart of the city of Detroit. The Committee on Ministry finds that there is protracted and increasing conflict between the Personnel Committee, Session, Congregation and Pastor. The purpose of the Administrative Commission is to*

- 1. Build trust with Session, Congregation and Pastor,*

2. *Through prayer and carefully listening to all parties concerned, discern what is happening in the church, paying particular attention to long-term, system issues,*
3. *And become partners with Session and Pastor to develop ways to address the issues and advance God's mission in Detroit through the congregation of Fort Street Presbyterian Church.*

*The Administrative Commission may assume any or all powers of original jurisdiction of the Session.*

The document went on to list responsibilities including building trust and demonstrating that the AC is there to work with them. It also included a suggested process and tasks to be accomplished, ending with the need for constant prayer.

At the meeting with Phil, Jean Loup was chosen to chair the AC and the first meeting was called for May 12. It was decided that Beth Downs and Jean Loup would attend the May 7<sup>th</sup> Session meeting to introduce the AC to the Session. Following the meeting with Phil Reed, Don Wright resigned from the AC and the Rev. Douglas Blaikie was appointed to replace him. Each member of the AC brought unique skills to our work, which proved to be very helpful.

The work of the first year was incredibly intense and claimed much of our time and energy. We met nineteen times and, in addition, conducted ten listening sessions with members of the congregation and staff, and interviewed others, including the Pastor, the Rev. Sharon Mook. As directed by Phil Reed's memo, we were focusing on listening, learning and building trust. Lou Prues put it this way, "Listen, listen, listen, build trust, listen, listen, listen, build trust ...."

Early on Dixie Elam shared a number of documents that prior efforts at working with the Fort Street Church had generated. Two members of the AC reviewed Session minutes for the past ten year and two others the Presbytery files on the Church. We also focused on communication, both within the AC and with the Session and Pastor. As part of our communication plan we decided that all members of the AC would attend all Session meetings.

As time passed, we began to identify issues that would need to be addressed. Both the review of documents and the listening sessions were helpful in this effort. The relationship between the congregation and the pastor, not only the current pastor but those who served before, was identified early on as needing attention. Other issues included the Session committee structure, fiscal and personnel processes, and the relationship between various programs (Open Door, the Chorale, and weddings) and the Church. In the latter matter it seemed that commitment was stronger to the program than to the overall church.

In mid-September, two members of the AC met with Sharon Mook to share the results of the listening sessions and the AC's initial observations of the situation at Fort Street. After some discussion, it was agreed that Sharon would prepare a document, outlining her responses with suggestions for future action. We also agreed that this document would provide the basis for discussions with the entire AC in mid- to late-October. At this second meeting the conversation began with Sharon's document and continued until we agreed to meet again. At the third meeting, Sharon announced her intention to resign as Pastor of Fort Street.

Planning for the transition began immediately. The Session accepted the resignation and the severance package, which the AC had negotiated, and agreed that Sharon's last Sunday would be December 14, 2014. The Rev. Dr. Sue Ellis Melrose accepted a three-month half-time temporary stated supply position, starting on January 4, 2015, to provide stability while a search could be conducted for a longer-term appointment.

The AC also invited an organizational consultant, Dr. Roland Loup, to meet with us on November 24, 2014, to discuss issues related to organizations in crisis and to hear suggestions on how to address the various issues. He emphasized that we need to be clear what our purpose is right now and answer the question, "What will be different?" Our role was to help them to health, moving forward together. It was a two-hour conversation that was very useful.

We met with Sue Melrose once each month to get updates on what was going on at Fort Street. We were especially pleased with her sense of calm which helped reduce conflict within the Session. There were a number of issues that she handled early on, especially the concern about fiscal processes and a restructuring of the Session. In addition, she provided helpful insights into the congregation, the Session, the tie between Fort Street and the city of Detroit, and some personnel matters.

By February we had moved forward on the appointment of a six-member Stated Supply Search Committee, three from the AC, including the chair, and three from the Session. The three from the AC were Beth Downs, Dixie Elam, and Harold Ellis, with Beth serving as chair, and those from the Session were Tom Edwards, Hedi Mulford, and Mark Topping. The Committee began work immediately. The Search Committee completed its work in April with the recommendation of The Rev. Dr. Robert Agnew as Temporary Stated Supply, an appointment greeted with appreciation by both the AC and the Session.

Now and then we had to remind ourselves to trust the process, to not get ahead of ourselves, to be patient. This was especially true during the two months between the time Sue Melrose left in early April and the arrival of Bob Agnew in early June. The level of anxiety apparent among the Session members and the congregation led to a return to past behaviors, which were seldom productive. Doug Blaikie moderated the May Session meeting and with Lou Prues continued the Session training begun by Sue. We also discussed the importance of waiting for Bob Agnew before taking action on significant changes was critical. It is unclear they agreed with us, but acquiesced.

Great was the sense of relief we all felt when Bob began his ministry at Fort Street. It was clear our work was not over, but we now had a long-term, full-time pastor addressing issues as they arose and consulting regularly with us. Our role became more one of monitoring and advising than of hands-on effort, and so we decided to change our attendance at Session meetings to two AC members instead of all. It was probably about this time that we began to like working with this Session. There was a new sense of cooperation as Bob and the Session moved forward together.

Over the next six months Bob and the Session approved the hiring of QuikBooks, an accounting firm, to manage the financial details and an Operations Manager to oversee the day-to-day financial matters and also dealt with an insurance claim for the damage to the steeple from a lightning strike. They also accepted the resignation of the Open Door manager. Other issues Bob identified to the AC included the organist, attendance at worship, facilities, and parking. He also pointed out the need to change the view of the church as several programs to that of "one church." Together we decided that the AC would handle a difficult personnel situation that had existed for some time before Bob arrived.

In the fall we began talking with Bob about the need for an outside consultant. After considering a number of options, it was decided to approach Roland Loup to conduct a day-long retreat for members of the Session and Deacons. The planning group included Bob, Beth from the AC and a couple of members of both the Session and Deacons. It was hoped the retreat would accomplish the following outcomes: 1) a common understanding of the current state of the church; 2) agreement on short-term (to the end of 2016) objectives that the church leadership would guide to move the church forward; and 3) agreement on responsibilities for leading actions to achieve these objectives.

The Retreat was held in April 2016 with almost all Elders and Deacons in attendance. There was lots of active engagement in discussion, identifying areas of strength and areas to be targeted. Four areas were identified for further small group/committee work by elder and deacon teams. In general the responses to the day were very positive; they liked the ability to actually talk with one another and work toward common goals. There was a growing realization that they are one church with many interests. In other words it was as if they realized for the first time they were charged with working together for the benefit of the Fort Street Presbyterian Church. Later it was agreed that Roland would be invited back for a meeting later in the fall for follow-up discussions. It too generated positive discussion and a new sense of energy.

In September 2016 the entire AC met with the Session at their regular meeting to talk about the future. We told them that much of the work that we'd been doing with them would be the fairly normal work done by a congregation as it prepares for calling a new pastor. However, the history of conflict with the pastor and within the congregation is long, longer than just one pastor or within just one program of the church. So in some ways the AC was charged with changing the culture of the Church. There are still questions to be pondered, but the AC was ready to agree to establish a Search Committee for an Interim Pastor to begin work in January.

The Interim Search Committee including Fort Street members Camille Cooke, Tom Edwards, and Craig McLean and AC members Lou Prues and Jean Loup began meeting in January 2017. Working closely with the Committee on Ministry, the Search Committee reviewed the process of calling an interim and then began telephone conversations with candidates in mid-March. There were moments of frustration as candidates withdrew or were seen as not being a good fit. In mid-summer we were given the names of a couple who were considering interim ministry.

Meanwhile Bob Agnew had resigned effective in early April and Neeta Nichols stepped in to moderate the Session and be present in the church one day each week. Unlike the two months in 2015 without a pastor, all went well.

In August the Interim Search Committee interviewed the Rev. Anne and Eric Lange, first in a conference call and then in person. We were impressed with the skills they would bring to Fort Street, maybe not the traditional interim skills, but Fort Street is not your typical congregation. We were also pleased with their sense of call and their energy level. In early September they accepted our offer with a mid-October start-date and the Search Committee and the AC were elated.

Having met with Anne and Eric twice and observed them as they work with the Session, the Administrative Commission now believes our role is at an end. We ask that this report serve as our final action and that the Commission be dismissed.

We owe thanks to a number of individuals and groups. High on our list are the pastors who served Fort Street during this almost-four year journey, Sue Melrose, Bob Agnew and Neeta Nichols. We also want to thank the Presbytery's Board of Trustees for setting up an account for our use; it helped primarily with the expenses of the consultant we brought in. And, last we want to thank all those who served on the Fort Street Session over these years and the congregation. Their willingness to work with us will forever be appreciated. Most of all we need to thank God for all the blessings and support we knew we were receiving all these months.