

Report on Fort Street Presbyterian Church's Experience with the Administrative Commission, 2013-2018

The Administrative Commission (AC) of Presbytery which has been working with Fort Street Presbyterian Church (FSPC) over the past several years is about to wrap up its work and request discharge. As part of their report-out process, they have asked for an additional report from the FSPC Session concerning the experience. This document is not the result of an exhaustive survey or a congregational interview, but represents collected comments from Session members who responded to a request for input. It is organized in the form of a series of questions asked of those Session members.

What were your thoughts about the AC process when it began?

Fort Street was dubious about the process at its inception. We had engaged in "listening sessions" organized by the Presbytery Committee on Ministry, and the result of those sessions and other deliberations was a dissolution of the pastoral relationship between FSPC and Rev. Sharon Mook. We had just finished the major efforts that surrounded the General Assembly's meeting in Detroit, and much of the church leadership was thinking episodically, not in terms of the long range. Many of us were extremely worried that an outside group might take root at FSPC and significantly change the culture, take over the process, and relegate the congregational leadership to a back-bench role. A few who worked more closely with Presbytery did not feel this way, but in general FSPC did not know what to expect and was wary of a process that might take longer than a year or so.

Comments:

"I was dubious about the efficacy of AC involvement up until the announcement that they recommended Sharon Mook step down as Senior Pastor."

"I was very concerned about what the outside influence might be on the church and how the church that I knew and loved might change."

"I was afraid it would be a witch-hunt."

"I was scared to death; pictured the demise of FSPC, the takeover of Session, a group of strangers coming in and wreaking havoc with the pretense of helping us."

What things did you see changing about Fort Street as the relationship with the AC grew?

Fort Street leadership noticed a move toward process stability. Session meetings, which had regularly been stretching through 10:30 p.m., came under a more orderly form of moderation. Necessary church business and business practices were reviewed and regularized. The introduction of Stated Supply ministers Sue Melrose and then Bob Agnew led to staff leadership and better management practices, as well as a focus on Presbyterian polity in decision-making. There was a back-to-basics approach to dealing with process, such as the weekly practice of counting the offering, and responsibilities for church task management were broadened to include new individuals and to spread old loads away from volunteers who were nearing burnout. This happened during a period when an unusually large number of deaths took senior leaders, and our beloved custodian, from us. The church also experienced a

number of membership resignations and the loss of some friends who simply walked away. There was a lot of churn during this early period in the AC relationship.

Comments:

“It is a sad fact that several congregants, including elders, who supported Sharon, did not remain at Fort Street after she left, but that also gave the church space to grow and work together collaboratively . . . I saw continuous improvement in the attitudes of the elders and a gradual thawing of a somewhat aloof relationship among the members of the AC. Now it was our turn to listen, and listen we did, to the helpful and cooperative guidance that came from these six fine people.”

“I felt that some processes were improved and that some relationships eased, but also, many of the people who disagreed with the new direction of the church simply left or were pushed aside, giving an illusion of less conflict that may have not been real.”

“[There was] More openness to the thoughts of others.”

“The Session meetings moved from anger and stagnancy toward respectful communication and good intentions.”

When did you perceive that our work with the AC was bearing fruit?

FSPC leaders and members generally began seeing that the relationship would be long-term, and would not be life-threatening, late in 2014 and early in 2015. The regular presence of the AC in groups at Session meetings and at major church functions demonstrated commitment without commandment. The work of AC members with key committees, such as Personnel and Finance, gave those committees new resources in reaching standard Presbyterian working methods. The demonstrated love and concern of Supply pastors helped FSPC begin to recognize the many things that needed to happen for the church to thrive. FSPC was approaching several epochal events, including the retirement of longtime Music Director Ed Kingins and the loss of Open Door director Ben Ogden, events that could have been overwhelming to the congregation without strong leadership. Review of ongoing FSPC programs found, and corrected, policy errors and reporting errors. Church operations became less of a contentious fight between volunteer leaders and more of an all-church effort to conduct business on a sound basis, and to conduct worship “decently and in good order.”

Comments:

“We all learned a great deal about church polity and our spiritual relationship to one another from each of the members of the AC, as well as from temporary pastors Melrose, Agnew, and Nichols. It is also my firm belief . . . that God was always with us.”

“I felt the AC did a good job when they organized listening sessions with members. I also felt that the ministers they brought in . . . were all constructive influences in the church.”

“[I perceived our work was bearing fruit] after we hired Bob Agnew.”

“When Sue Melrose and Bob Agnew arrived, this signaled that the AC believed FSPC had a future.”

Was there a particular high point for you at any time during the AC relationship and, if so, can you describe that?

FSPC experienced several major events during the time of AC involvement, any one of which could have been challenging. These included, in no particular order, the retirement and Emeritus posting of Ed Kingins after a lengthy career as Music Director; the hiring of his replacement, Marilyn Biery, and the restructuring of music at Fort Street; celebration of the lives of leaders such as Robert Sale (Open Door and other church program leadership) and Don Lorimer (Veterans and facilities leadership); regular annual involvement in the Detroit Free Press Marathon; major restoration work on building systems and recovery from weather disasters; hiring and replacement of staff; budget negotiations and plugging unexpected holes left by cost overruns or donation under-funding. FSPC conducted two pastoral searches, one for a Stated Supply pastor, the other for Interim Minister. Certainly one high point for church leadership was an all-day retreat, professionally led and provided by Presbytery, which allowed Elders, Deacons, and officers, to engage in long-term planning and to identify church needs for care and growth.

Comments:

“There were two high points, actually. I served on both pastor search committees . . . the composition of the committees told me that the AC was beginning to trust in the ability of Fort Streeters to carry out productive work for the benefit of the congregation. The interactions on both committees were such that an outsider would not have been able to tell who were the AC members and who were the Fort Streeters.”

“When the AC started listening to us by groups, rather than throwing their weight around. When the AC created the Search Committee for the Stated Supply pastor, which included Session members, this indicated to me that they believed things had changed.”

Were there frustrations with the relationship and, if so, how have they resolved?

FSPC leaders and members admitted that there were indeed times when the AC relationship was frustrating and challenging. Old programs were investigated and, in some cases, faced strict requirements to change. An example of this was FSPC’s Wedding Evangelism program, which incurred strong disfavor from the AC but was strenuously defended by much of the congregational leadership. Many Session members were angered by the long timeline envisioned by the AC, and challenged members of the commission to justify a years-long process. Some members resented changes made at the behest of the AC and supply pastors. There was also staff frustration at scrupulous oversight of work activities and changes made to tighten up areas of laxity in church process. Such frustrations were largely resolved by the emerging sense of wholeness and health in the church operations that came as a result of attention paid to the details; other resolution came as leaders realized that they were becoming strong and productive in their roles as decision-makers rather than as micro-managers. The quality of worship became more consistent as FSPC moved from a period of pulpit supply to the strong ministry of our temporary pastors. Attention from the Presbytery seemed to focus in a helpful, rather than forbidding, way with the lens of the AC in place. Not every frustration was cured, as the comments here will show, but in general FSPC came to find itself more in accord with the AC than otherwise.

Comments:

“My biggest frustrations were with the lack of transparency, the backward-looking nature of the AC, the lack of acknowledgment of the people who left or those who did not feel there was a crisis within the church, and the slow pace [of the AC process].”

“While I know it was necessary to heal past conflict, it seemed like the AC was simply trying to clean the slate to give a fresh start, which is nice, but I do not feel we were put on track to grow and thrive.”

“My frustrations were at the very beginning. Although I thought that the listening sessions were well-done, I thought less of the paid consultant who ‘surveyed’ the congregation following worship one Saturday. What resolved this frustration is that apparently nothing was ever done with the information.”

“There was an aloofness from the AC at the start, but that was appropriate. After all, I am sure they wondered if we were a loony bunch from what they had heard.”

What might you say to other congregations who find themselves working with an AC in the future?

The FSPC experience with the AC revealed that there was a genuine sentiment within Presbytery, and a real commitment on the part of the AC members, to save our congregation from ruin. FSPC found that the AC process brought significant investments of time, of spirituality, and of resources to our congregation. The more we reached out to the AC, the more the AC reached back, and our relationship became one of mutual support rather than antagonism. We also found that our eagerness to spend the minimum amount of time in “crisis” and to get out into the process of normal congregational life was misplaced. The AC helped us discover that there was long healing to be done, and that we needed to take time to change processes that may have been flawed, ill-implemented, or ill-run. Like a fresh visitor to the home of a senior citizen, the AC noticed things about us that we had long ago stopped examining. In some cases these were merely charming eccentricities; in others, dangerous hazards. About halfway through the AC process we began loving and treasuring our AC colleagues, eagerly welcoming them to our Session table, wanting them to be involved in our lives and that of the congregation. Now, as we come up to their discharge, we find ourselves owing them debts of gratitude and affection. We recognize the incredibly difficult work they undertook, the thousands of hours and tens of thousands of miles they put into our process, and their advocacy on our behalf with the greater body of Presbytery and COM.

Comments:

“Work with the AC. They are not the enemy. Get to know them, understand their perspectives, and learn from them. Remember that they have the same long-range goals as you do.”

“I would tell [a church] to be very patient, to trust the process and to accept the assistance that is being offered. I would recommend that churches avoid the AC process if at all possible, but once it begins, the best thing to do is to lean into it.”

“I would say trust the process, believe God is guiding it, be open to working collegially, be patient. Effective change does not happen overnight.”

“I learned that, however well-intentioned, accomplished and intelligent we may be, or think we are, as members and lay leaders of the church, we cannot succeed apart from a strong faith in God and qualified, dedicated, clerical leadership . . . I sincerely thank the hard-working, long-suffering, members of the AC.”

“This has been one of the most God-filled experiences of my life.”

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