

April 2023

Open Letter from the Session of Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church

The past few years have brought much pain, loss, and grief to our beloved congregation. But we believe in a God who comforts those who mourn and opens a pathway through the wilderness (Isaiah 40). We pray that God's grace will enable our congregation to heal from past hurts and move ahead in a healthy way toward the future God desires for us.

We appreciate the hard work and commitment of all those who have served on the CHPC Session, Personnel Committee, other committees and task groups, and members who spoke up and asked questions during an extremely difficult period of conflict. We especially appreciate the heartfelt apologies shared with the congregation by several previous Session members. We may not understand or agree on all the details surrounding the firing of our longtime music director, Debbie Dierks, and the subsequent resignation of our pastor, Roger Veliquette, but we believe that the church's current leaders (the Session) must seek to learn from what happened and take responsibility for setting the direction for the church's present and future mission.

Therefore, in a spirit of humility, we as a Session offer the following list of things we have learned (some of which have already been addressed in recently revised church policies):

1. The Session, along with the pastor, should take the lead in all decisions affecting the health, direction, and ministry of the congregation. "The session is responsible to guide and govern the life of the congregation" (*Book of Order*, G-1.0103).
2. It was ill-advised to delegate authority for major personnel decisions to the Personnel Committee, allowing the latter to act without first consulting the Session. (Policies have been revised to ensure that Personnel will not bear the burden of hiring or firing without Session participation in those decisions. This better reflects Presbyterian theology and who this congregation understands itself to be as a community of faith.)
3. We acknowledge the stress, long meetings, and anguish experienced by members of the Session and the Personnel Committee, who sought the best for CHPC as they tried to rectify a flawed process, follow state laws, and obtain adequate information and resources during a time when the Covid pandemic limited face-to-face meetings. We appreciate the Session's actions to offer severance packages to both Debbie and Roger so they would have financial security while making the transition to new employment.
4. We regret decisions and communications, including some from presbytery, that made minister participants in CHPC feel ostracized from our community. We also regret that some members felt that their legitimate questions and concerns about Debbie's firing were ignored or rebuffed by church leaders.
5. We have come to understand that circumstances leading to Debbie's firing included the inability of Roger and Debbie to work together and reports that Debbie was not complying with Covid-related regulations relating to the use of the church building.

Those issues were exacerbated by the inability to have regular face-to-face conversations and gatherings during the pandemic.

6. We acknowledge that an information vacuum created by lack of transparency and inadequate communication to the congregation by church leaders fomented distrust and spread of misinformation. The decision to keep private all information concerning the reason for Debbie's firing was a decision taken in good conscience, reflecting a desire to protect Debbie and maintain confidentiality. However, this lack of transparency had the unfortunate result of spawning myriad explanations based on rumors and partial experiences.
7. We acknowledge the gifts that both Roger and Debbie brought to their ministries, and the sadness of many of us that those gifts will no longer enrich the life of CHPC.

We the Session commit to the following:

1. Take seriously our role as spiritual leaders of the congregation.
2. Be guided by our ordination vows, especially "to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church," to serve "with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love," and "to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ."
3. Acknowledge that members have been hurt in a variety of ways by recent events and respect each member's experience; offer opportunities for members to talk about and process what happened.
4. Welcome back joyfully any who decide to return to our church community after having distanced themselves during times of conflict.
5. Practice transparency and regular communication of Session actions to members; respond promptly to all letters and emails sent to Session.
6. Update church policies to reflect CHPC's stated values, best practices, and Presbyterian theology and polity (already in process); make policies accessible by posting them on the CHPC website.
7. Practice a restorative approach in dealing with personnel issues, drawing first on the resources of Scripture, prayer, presbytery, and the wider church when there are conflicts or problems with job performance.
8. Continue to carry out the Session's responsibilities for worship, as outlined in the *Book of Order*, which include ensuring that the pastor and music director confer "on anthems and other musical offerings" and that conferences on these matters take place "appropriately and on a regular basis" (W-2.0305).
9. Collaborate with the pastor and deacons to rebuild broken trust and relationships and to nurture a loving and grace-filled community in which all are welcomed and encouraged to grow in Christian discipleship.
10. Listen, learn from, and extend grace to those with whom we disagree.
11. Strive always to be willing to confess our mistakes and seek forgiveness, and to forgive those who have hurt us individually or as a congregation.
12. Seek to be motivated by faith rather than fear.
13. Prayerfully seek God's guidance as we discern together a vision for the future of CHPC.