

CHITTENANGO ADMINISTRATIVE COMMISSION FINAL REPORT 4/23/24

The Administrative Commission for the First Presbyterian Church of Chittenango has been meeting since June 2023 and has worked through our charge for the past 11 months. In this final report we present a synopsis of our work.

We entered a situation where there was major discord between the Pastor and the Session, and the Pastor/Session and the Pre-School of fifty years. Awareness of these struggles had filtered into the congregation, and along with several other issues, was causing concern among some members. Key to the call for the AC was:

Four of the Six Session members, including the clerk of Session, had resigned by mid-April, and

The Pastor/Session and Preschool attempted to resolve the relationship; in spite of this, the Little Rainbows Preschool leadership and teachers resigned in mid-April. This led to the closing of the Preschool for the remainder of the year, creating issues around First

Presbyterian in the larger community as well.

Rev. Justin Marple began his ministry in December of 2022, and discord began in January as Justin sought to deal with issues around the Preschool constitution and the Preschool's continuance. The Over the Rainbow Preschool had been a joint fifty-year ministry between First Presbyterian Church and St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church. As a result of the legal problems and bankruptcy of the Syracuse diocese, St. Patrick's had had to step away from the relationship with the Presbyterian Church and the Preschool. It was awareness of that reality, and ensuing learnings and assumptions about what this meant, vis-a-vis a fifty-year old, outdated constitution, that led Rev. Marple to aggressively seek changes. From the perspective of the AC, the methods utilized to do this were not helpful or appropriately inclusive of all involved. Interviews with many of the individuals and groups related to the church and preschool, as well as research of congregational and preschool records and emails, led us to believe that an atmosphere of distrust, bullying, and non-collegiality had been created that was not repairable as fostered by Rev. Marple. In response to this inappropriate behavior the brokenness escalated. Additionally, alongside of these issues, some congregation members were struggling with the divisiveness of the pastor's theology and leadership that did not seem to leave room for them.

The COM conversation with Rev. Marple in June, encouraging him that this situation was irreparable, was extremely wise on the part of COM, and led, we believe, to better outcomes for both the congregation and the Marple family. Rev. Marple announced his resignation on June 18th, 2023

Since July, we have been working to:

- review all records available to us prayerfully and honestly in an effort to understand the struggles and places/people in need of healing
- support the congregation with presence through several congregational meetings as well as AC presence at key gatherings, modeling the grace of Christ to and with them whenever possible
- continue consistent work as the Session to keep the "wheels moving" and provide opportunity for rich worship and fellowship as we cycled through the church year
- be vocal about the relationship between the Chittenango congregation and the larger presbytery
- seek appropriate legal advice for necessary actions relating to the closing of the pre-school and a new relationship with that leadership
- support the pre-school leadership in their efforts to heal, renew and regroup, culminating in the "welcome back" of the new Little Rainbows Learning Center to the building for September 2024, as an independent nonprofit.

-elect a new Session in January who worked side by side with the AC for two months and have since taken on the leadership themselves. This new Session has had, and will continue, training around their leadership roles together and with a pastor, as well as what for them are key issues of hospitality and connection to the community.

-rebuild community presence through various kinds of publicity, intentional communications, and a transparent presence.

This AC worked hard, and I am so very grateful for their willingness to stick to all that was asked of them, especially early on. The group worked overtime through October, as we sifted through very painful accounts of what had taken place, and listened to brokenness that could not be ignored. The Session is aware that the need for healing and in some cases, forgiveness, continues. We have seen that the desire to be faithful disciples in this congregation is strong, and they are moving forward!

The AC struggled on several occasions to discern a way forward that would be life-giving to the congregation. Because of that priority, we chose not to pursue what we believed could likely become ecclesiastical or civil charges. However, should the need ever arise, we are lodging with the Stated Clerk a thumb drive that includes the paperwork which came to us as a part of this work.

Thank you for the trust you placed in us to represent you with First Chittenango; we covet your prayers for this congregation as it moves forward.

Respectfully submitted:

Donna Chapman Commissioned Ruling Elder (served through January 9, 2024)

Jane Dasher, Teaching Elder

Michael Hill, Teaching Elder

Mark Kasdorf, Ruling Elder

Pete Owens, Ruling Elder

Bill Porter, Ruling Elder

Susan Faye Wonderland, Teaching Elder, AC Moderator