

## **Notes from “A Time for Sharing and Listening”**

Sunday, April 3, 2022

Covenant Presbyterian Church

Madison, Wisconsin

*On Sunday, April 3, we gathered in-person at church to discuss the departure of Associate Pastor Jeff Fox-Kline, whose last day was February 28, 2022. These notes from our facilitator and from our Personnel Committee are provided especially for the benefit of people who could not attend that day. We had good and healthy conversations after this information was presented. Please feel free to reach out to a member of the Personnel Committee or to Pastor Charlie Berthoud if you have more questions.*

### Big picture overview from Rev. Sarah Moore-Nokes

The Presbyterian call process is, as you may know, a lengthy one and it involves a number of stakeholders.

Each presbytery, which is the regional governing body, has its own flavor of the process but there are foundational aspects which are the same no matter what.

A call is always an agreement among three parties: the pastor (or associate), the presbytery (often through its committee or commission on ministry), and the congregation (which is why you all vote to call and vote to dissolve). All three parties are involved at the beginning *and* the end. What this means is that no one person (like a Sr. Pastor) or even a small group of people (like a personnel committee) can make a decision about the status of pastor without consulting with and making an agreement with the other parties.

Part of the reason that the call process can take a long time is because there is heavy emphasis on fit. Not all pastors are a good fit for all congregations and the PC(USA) takes that very seriously. The thing about fit, however, is that its context specific and contexts change. Pastors also change. And we, (by we I mean Presbyterians), don't always get it right.

One of the challenges of this arrangement is that even though the congregation has voice and vote in these decisions, it would be untenable to work out all the personnel things like supervision, evaluation, tweaks to the job description etc.. out as a whole congregation. So you, as a matter of practicality, and by electing ruling elders and naming a personnel committee provide a mechanism for those functions to happen effectively - in some ways they are like a human resources department (though we have to be careful about that analogy because it falls apart quickly when you think about a company-wide vote on hiring and firing).

What this means though is that much of the supervision, evaluation, shifts in job descriptions, etc... happen behind the scenes. And so naturally, if there is a significant change, like dissolution, it can come as a surprise.

I'll simply add here. A surprise in the midst of the pandemic and upheaval of the last two years is all that much more challenging.

What I know about this process, that has happened here, is that it absolutely aligned with the way that we in the PC(USA) agree that we will conduct this work.

The personnel committee is going to provide a brief overview of the process as it played out just so that we're all hearing the same information.

After that, you'll have an opportunity to ask any questions that you want. We won't be able to answer any content questions - that is what were the specific reasons for this dissolution but if you have questions or even curiosity about the process, we'll be happy to answer those.

Then there will be some time to express whatever you want to express, be it frustration, anger, sadness, gratitude, solidarity etc...

Just because the process was conducted in alignment with the polity of the Presbyterian Church, doesn't mean you have to love how it unfolded and your leadership, wisely, wants to allow some space for the emotions around that.

### Notes from Covenant Personnel Committee

In 2017, as we began the transition into our new organizational model, the Personnel committee developed new position descriptions for all staff, and implemented a more rigorous oversight of staff, including annual evaluations, and greater supervisor responsibility, based on recommendations from consultant Sarai Rice.

Among the expectations communicated to Jeff, and other staff, in evaluation meetings were expectations for teamwork, taking initiative and leadership, and following through on initiatives and programs.

Based on best personnel practices, we handled all evaluations confidentially. The supervisor conducts the evaluation meeting with the staff member, sometimes accompanied by a member of the Personnel Committee. When congregation or other staff members are asked for input, we assure them of confidentiality. The Personnel Committee does not discuss

evaluation information outside of the person being evaluated, the supervisor and Personnel committee.

Conversations about Jeff's evaluations began several years ago. Concerns were expressed in writing and in meetings with Jeff. Charlie contacted Executive Presbyter Chaz Ruark in summer of 2019, to begin a conversation about process and best practices. When Covid hit in early 2020, those conversations paused. In summer of 2021, the conversations continued.

The Personnel Committee consulted with EP Ruark and Committee on Ministry co-chair Stacy Cavanaugh, and we had several meetings together. Jeff was asked to participate in a ministry assessment done by LeaderWise of New Brighton, MN, an organization that serves our presbytery and synod. Discussions with Jeff, the Committee on Ministry and the Executive Presbyter of John Knox Presbytery continued in the fall of 2021.

In January, it was mutually decided by Jeff, the Personnel Committee, and the Committee on Ministry that Jeff's Associate Pastorate position at Covenant should be dissolved. (That's the official Presbyterian terminology for ending a pastorate.)

Given that there is a special process in the Presbyterian Church for dissolution of a pastor or associate pastor term of call (meaning that the Presbytery and congregation must approve), it certainly creates a dilemma concerning what information can and should be shared concerning reasons for recommending dissolution.

Since there was a negotiation process which was followed with Jeff, the Personnel Committee thought that it was only appropriate to share the terms of the dissolution which was reached with Jeff. Neither Jeff nor the committee thought it was appropriate to share details.

In early 2022, extensive meetings and discussions were held to develop the official John Knox Presbytery paperwork (Covenant of Closure) to be presented to the congregation and to negotiate a severance package with Jeff. The Covenant includes a non-disparagement clause.

It is customary to offer severance when a pastor leaves a church without another ministry call or job because pastors are not eligible for unemployment compensation. The standard severance recommended by our Presbytery is one month pay and benefits for every year of service. Jeff was at Covenant for 5.375 years and the negotiated severance package was for 7 months' pay and benefits.

Many have questioned the short time frame between the congregation being informed of the special congregational meeting and that meeting. As the mutual decision was made to end the pastorate, it was felt by all involved that dragging out the process would only lead to additional stress for Jeff and Covenant. It was also recommended by the Presbytery and by the

Presbyterian Board of Pensions which administers both pensions and health care for pastors that termination of a pastorate should be done at the end of a month. Thus, February 28 was the chosen date.

There have been quite a few questions and concerns about the type of farewell reception that was held for Jeff. The Personnel Committee worked with Jeff to plan the reception. The timing was awkward due to the short time frame and the fact that Covenant was still closed due to Covid and Jeff was considerably concerned about Covid and being in large groups. Thus, one of the session members helping with the reception suggested that we might have a drive-through reception like the donut and Heifer drive-throughs we had last year. Jeff at first wasn't very comfortable having anything. We encouraged him that congregation members needed the opportunity to say goodbye and thank him for his ministry. He took a few days to talk it over with his family and then agreed that Monday afternoon, February 28 would work for him. It wasn't ideal, but it was what Jeff felt comfortable doing. The Personnel Committee was pleased that there was a steady stream of people stopping by starting 15 minutes before the planned start time and continuing until the 6 p.m. end time.