

Council Approves Short-Term Changes to COM

TO: John Knox Presbytery Members & Clerks of Sessions

FROM: JKP Council—Scott Anderson, moderator

SUBJECT: Short-term Changes to the Way We Do Committee on Ministry Work Together

Since the 1990s, statistics continue to show a growing number of American adults leaving Christianity. This trend toward lower church participation was accelerated for all of our churches by the pandemic, and for our many small-community churches by the continuing slow demise of rural America and the impact on congregations. The result has been an increasingly high level of stress both on local congregations and wider church systems. This is not unique to PC(USA) churches; it has been experienced by Christian denominations generally.

In John Knox Presbytery, these trends appear most acutely not simply in our membership numbers, but in the dwindling availability of supply pastors and session moderators. Congregations searching for pastors find fewer candidates and the need for more accelerated timelines. Tightening finances have built anxiety for both pastors and congregations. Meanwhile, the Presbytery structures that were created many years ago to sustain and govern our faith communities at a time when they were larger and better resourced have become stretched beyond their capacity. In John Knox Presbytery, the burden of these changing and deepening realities has fallen most heavily on the Committee on Ministry, and in the past year, even more so on its co-chairs. We recently discovered that this is not a concern or a problem, but a growing crisis.

These are systemic issues, to be clear, that will require hard work to be done both in imagining new ways the COM might do its work and in clarifying realistic expectations of pastors, congregations, and the Presbytery. That must be and will be part of our broader revisioning process. But the urgency of this challenge and the well-being of our people (both those serving and those being served) also require short- and mid-term actions both to prevent individual burnout and to allow the system to continue to serve our churches. Here are the actions that the Presbytery Council, in conjunction with the COM and the Personnel Committee, have approved to address the immediate situation:

- **Beginning February 6, for two months, COM co-chairs Stacy Cavanaugh and Mark Hughey will be given a two-month sabbatical from the day-to-day initial receipt and handling of COM-related issues.** All general COM-related inquiries beyond those of an assigned liaison from COM (say, to a Pastor Nominating Committee) should be directed to Jeff Japinga, Revisioning Executive Presbyter. Stacy (and her previous co-chair Jim Scaife) have done incredible work under sometimes difficult circumstances. We owe them a huge debt of gratitude. And we owe especially Stacy (and her Monroe congregation) some space, to renew, recharge, and also have time to focus on their congregational leadership. Stacy and Mark will remain co-chairs of COM, moderate its

meetings, be available for consultation, and be encouraged to begin the strategic thinking about the future of COM. And COM liaisons, especially to Pastor Nominating Committees, remain fully in place; there is no change there.

- **We request all Presbytery members (ministers of the Word and Sacrament and commissioners) and other leaders of JKP congregations to take Stacy Cavanaugh off your COM speed dial and put Jeff Japinga on (ep@jknox.org; 616-283-0621 to text or call.)** Let us be clear: this proposal is not an effort to put the important work of COM on hold; ignore that work or the needs of our congregations; or place more power in the hands of our executive. It is instead to temporarily transfer key responsibilities from those people who are presently overburdened by them to other people who are in a position to shoulder them, at least for the short-term.
- To allow Jeff Japinga the time to take on these additional responsibilities not assigned to him in his job description—and to continue to allow him space to lead our ongoing revisioning work—**Jeff will be asked to curtail temporarily some of the involvement he has had in other areas of Presbytery life.** More specifically, between February 5 and April 1, Jeff will need to curtail some of his participation and work with other committees and task forces, his supply preaching, and attendance at regional gatherings. While this is neither ideal nor anyone's preferred course, it is triage that is necessary to avoid simply transferring an unsustainable load from one person to another.
- For the mid-term, in order to prevent simply sliding back into old and unhelpful patterns, **Council has approved a request from the Committee on Ministry to hire an interim COM coordinator for 15-18 hours a week, on a one-year contract,** to take pressure off the system and allow for the Presbytery's leadership to study and consider long-term possibilities. This new COM coordinator will be modeled after a highly effective position in neighboring Winnebago Presbytery, with which COM has consulted. The cost of this position will be funded by the Emergency / Opportunity Fund held by the Presbytery. The Personnel Committee has been tasked with advertising the position, conducting interviews, and recommending a candidate to Council. An aggressive timeline would place April 15 as a hiring goal.

In most revisioning processes, significant changes, like the ones proposed above, are often put on hold to allow the process to reach its conclusions. We do not have that luxury. We must do something to ensure the continuation of the basic functions of the Presbytery's administration while at the same time respecting the limits of the people who have been called to perform this work, and we believe this is the wisest course of action. It will allow the Presbytery the time and space to re-vision together our future vision and structure in new and creative ways, while caring for the well-being of those who carry out the Presbytery's work. It also will allow us to maintain the Presbytery's essential and ongoing commitment to support our congregations and ministers of the Word and Sacrament, a key role for the Committee on Ministry.

We live in a challenging time for the church, both at the local level and in its wider expression as a presbytery. But it is also a time that beckons to us to recognize that God is doing a new thing, even in our Presbytery, and that we have an opportunity to live into our calling as a church that is once reformed, but always reforming. It will take all of us, using both our individual gifts and our commitment to a common future, to make this work. We hope you will embrace these specific steps as part of a broader strategic to imagine our future together with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. Thank you.