

THE CHURCH OF THE COVENANT
Session Minutes

Stated Meeting, Wednesday, January 27, 2021, 7 p.m., via Zoom

Elders present: Heidi Braun, Mary Anne Bromelmeier, Barb Clint, Jenny Conner, Susan Dahm, Anne Wombwell de Coningh, Theodis Fipps, Matthew Garrett, Dale Goode, Rod Keen, Chris Langmack, Sybil Marsh, Cathy Miller, Erica Stubbs

Elders excused: Kathy Farkas, Cindy Szafraniec

Moderator present: The Reverend William Long Hudson

Clerk present: Deni Horstman

Deacon present: Julie Mailey

Guest present: The Reverend June W. Begany

Rev. Hudson called the meeting to order and opened with prayer at 7:03 p.m. A quorum was declared. Approval of the consent agenda was M/S/C unanimously. Approval of the agenda was M/S/C unanimously.

Clerk's report

1. Deni began with birthday wishes to the moderator. Susan cited Ps. 118:24.
2. Approval of the 2020 Church Statistical Report was M/S/C unanimously with corrections to be made to the discrepancy in numbers for total membership.
3. Deni shared the per capita statement from Presbytery of the Western Reserve of \$11,732.42 (\$32.41/Covenant member). Barb asked whether there had been any resolution of the management problems at the Synod of the Covenant, as recounted last year in PWR reports. Bill said there is a new office in Detroit and there is a reorganization underway. He described the synod level of PCUSA structure as decreasing in importance as we have grown closer across the country. He has talked with UPCaM about a synod project to support college chaplaincy work.
4. A Centennial Coordinating Task Force has been suggested during a MoFF centennial brainstorming session to help celebrate the remainder of Covenant's Centennial year.
5. The Action Items chart was included again for elders' reference.

Moderator report

“Transitional Eyes”: Bill opened discussion of what he sees as an important part of his work under his interim transitional pastor contract, which is to convey to the church he is serving what he believes any prospective new installed pastor (or any other newcomer) would see in various aspects of the congregation's life. He sees a bit of disconnect between our congregation's commitment to our place in University Circle and our building, and to the building's condition. Parts of the building are glorious, but others look old and dying, especially on the second and third floor. Deni screenshared seventeen photos she had taken at Bill's request over the weekend as the agenda for the meeting was being formed, including some interior and exterior areas.

Chris said we need to have a good-looking facility for the membership development that his new committee will attempt. Otherwise his group's marketing efforts and expenses will be wasted.

Bill particularly mentioned the bathrooms across the building. He feels we are and have always been a cathedral church and need to bring the whole building up to that level.

Bill's overall point was that the building's condition does not reflect what he has come to understand as our actual care and love for the building.

Rod commented as someone long involved in matters of Building & Grounds that the trustees have focused on keeping withdrawals from our endowment funds down, and indeed the trustees have

stewarded our endowment resources well. But, except for the sanctuary and the lower level, a lot of the building has come to look beaten up. He estimated that it could take between \$1M and \$2M to put things in a condition that would make us all proud. He would like to see the Building & Grounds Committee set up a project to get an architect to determine all of the work elements necessary. The endowment is meant to support the church, not to grow wealth. With 2020–2021 as a celebratory year, and with the church closed, this year is good timing. He recalled that, in the congregation's history, in a time of deep trouble and division, it was agreed to build the education wing. In a time of the crisis of the Civil War, the U.S. Capitol dome was completed. Rod believes we should raise as much as we can and commit the remaining funds necessary from endowment funds.

Barb agreed with these perspectives, i.e., that the building reads like that of a dying congregation. Spending on renovation is an investment in ourselves, and otherwise we miss this chance to signal the true vibrancy of our work.

Chris reiterated his concern from a member care and cultivation angle that the building support and inspire current and new members. The building needs to be ready for those who respond to rejuvenated marketing initiatives.

Heidi expressed her own excitement regarding this discussion. She recounted her experience as a church member mother-of-the-bride attempting to camouflage the appearance of the metalwork and stonework of the front steps. Other young couples who might marry here and build their families would move on to a different church. Kirsten and Luke's wedding was Labor Day weekend, when it seemed about 100 degrees in the Herrick Room. The bride and bridesmaids dressed in the air conditioned office and the groom and groomsmen used the library.

Bill commented that investing in air conditioning more spaces would be better for the organ, for the building overall, and probably avoid some of the summer attendance drop-off. Rod recalled a figure from the past of about \$300K to install AC in the sanctuary and \$80K to operate in the summer, stressing that we have the financial resources, and what we really need is members.

Bill invited others who had not commented to do so.

Sybil said how much she liked what Chris said. We would not fetishize or idolize our building but clean up unwelcoming, disheveled spaces. She is thinking about how we could use durable surfaces and make our building welcoming and accessible to, for example, a lady from Abingdon Arms, while preserving its historical character.

Theodis said he likes what he is hearing. If we do nothing, we won't change or attract anyone. We can grow if we do what we know needs to be done.

Mary Anne agrees with Theo and Sybil; and also feels there are other things we need to work on as a group.

Erica agrees with Barb and Sybil. It doesn't have to be extravagant. Keep the focus on restoration.

Jenny is in agreement. She agrees particularly with Rod about not being tightfisted and dying; and also with Sybil about not being extravagant. Jenny particularly does not want our building to seem inaccessible to young people and children. Dale agreed. Julie believes this is a huge issue. The church really is the people. We have pushed infants to wherever we have space. If we want families, we need to be what we want to be.

Matthew appreciates putting people first, and also resonates with Rod. This meeting *is* the people. He described the situation for the annual Holiday CircleFest Carol Sing, which attracts hundreds of people to the church. The music staff goes out of their way beforehand, climbing into the chancel attic to replace bulbs, using a cherry picker to fix chandelier lights, and otherwise making sure people are wowed by their visit. But there are music groups like Apollo's Fire and others who have considered our building and for different reasons of building features—often related to lack of bathrooms and dressing space—picked another facility. He is excited for the opportunity have more ways to help us to grow.

Anne agrees with everyone. Make it our business to get an architect who can guide this.

June feels we need to make it look like we care, with refurbishment. We also need to better highlight what we do, telling our story a little more vocally.

Theodis continued that there is a serious mismatch. There is one look from Euclid Avenue, and then, when you get to the second and third floor, the quality is gone.

Bill asked how we needed to proceed. Rod pointed out that session is not the right body to lead our effort. Building & Grounds has primary responsibility. Covenant needs to hire someone to guide us, and the trustees and B&G are well suited to take this first step.

Cathy pointed out that we did include a handicapped-accessible restroom and better elevator in the accessibility project funded by Betty Rose. Often the aesthetic things get pushed down the list for major problems such as basement plumbing problems. She also wondered if the Cleveland Restoration Society could help. This anniversary time is a wonderful time to do what is needed. Rod commented that the Restoration Society gave Covenant an award for the sanctuary renovation; there could be community support.

Rod reflected that Covenant used to have trained building engineers, then evolved into having as custodian someone who was a wonderful man, and also a very good cook. Barb commented that the right amount of investment and competence can prevent surprises.

Jenny wanted to plant a seed of perhaps devoting a small amount of the sanctuary space in the back to a glassed-in cry room.

Bill suggested a joint board meeting on the evening of the regular session meeting for February. The more buy-in the better. By consensus, session agreed to make the February meeting of session a joint meeting of the boards with the main subject being the building.

Resolution of Harriet Wadsworth pastoral concern: Bill recounted to session that in speaking with Harriet, she was specific about her need to feel restored to the church after being involuntarily removed as trustee representative to the Personnel Committee. Bill observed generally that when we have been hurt, the past and present are connected. He instructed that, in PCUSA polity, the primary disciplinary “court” for members is session. He drew attention to the session packet document describing the resolution he achieved thanks to recent meetings with Harriet and the following sitting elders: Mary Anne Bromelmeier, Anne Wombwell deConingh, Chris Langmack, and Cathy Miller (Rod Keen provided PCUSA legal background relevant to Harriet’s case).

Bill recommends the following actions to session:

1. That Harriet Wadsworth be fully exonerated and that this shall be reflected in the minutes of session and in her file at The Church of the Covenant.
2. That the session affirms that church discipline is always done in accordance with the *Book of Order*.
3. That the session direct the Personnel Committee to develop a definition of “confidentiality” and bring that to session for approval.

Chris pointed out to session that the group of elders was unanimous. All members of the group agreed that what happened to Harriet was illegal, wrongful, and an abuse of authority. It was M/S/C unanimously to take the actions.

Additionally, as part of Bill’s relationship with the PWR Committee on Ministry, he will do the following: Report to the Committee on Ministry of the Presbytery of the Western Reserve the action of June 2019 and its reflection on The Reverend Melanie Marsh Baum for her failure to follow the rules of discipline in the *Book of Order* and her lack of pastoral concern for a member of her flock.

Resumption of mailed *Covenant News*: Bill said that a mailed newsletter will resume with its first mailing targeted for Feb. 15. Anne has agreed to be editor. She will profile a senior member of the church, as briefly discussed a few session meetings ago, for each issue. Deni showed an image of the original *Covenant Courier*, also introduced as Lent began (1953). Anne liked the message from The Reverend Dr. Harry B. Taylor in that issue and suggested including it or a portion thereof. Anne also suggested using the name *Courier* again to help avoid confusion with the *e-news*. Bill reiterated Deni’s comment in the

clerk report that the MoFF meeting had included the idea of forming a Centennial Coordinating Committee and suggested that Deni chair it. MOTION: Form a Centennial Coordinating Committee with Deni as chair. M/S/C unanimously.

Organ Committee work resumes: Bill asked Matthew to speak to this. Matthew commented that we have amazing pipe organs. The front organ presents a big project for the church. Indeed, the congregation needs to think of the instruments and their maintenance as investments.

Bill said that attention to the needs of the chancel organ is not a one-year process, but rather more like 3–5 years. Harriet chairs the committee. She is welcoming new members. One related project is the completion of the cap of wood molding on the rear balcony railing. Covenant has recently received a major gift toward work on the front organ.

Stewardship update: We are at \$10K over goal.

Away May 11–18: Bill plans his first week of vacation at this time. The occasion is the wedding of Bill's son. June Begany agreed to be pulpit supply that Sunday.

Presbytery of the Western Reserve meeting report: June reported that Covenant is one of five churches in the PWR that is now eligible for a Church Vitality grant. Other news and agenda items included projects related to racial justice; First Presbyterian Church of Elyria is planning to close; masks are being made to facilitate youth holding summer jobs; and PWR will meet via zoom at least through the May meeting.

Ministry of Faith Formation

Matthew reiterated that the idea of forming a Centennial Coordinating Task Force came up during a recent MoFF meeting.

Matthew screenshared footage from one camera purchased as part of the Video Project. The camera was tested from three places: the west gallery, above the prayer desk, and the east gallery. The camera is capable of capturing some of the detail of a sign in the narthex from the prayer desk. The task force continues to absorb information from professionals and other churches regarding camera placement and other aspects of moving forward. The next step is meeting with and hiring a professional installer. The task force sought three quotes and received one so far.

Rod would envision using some kind of tripod that can be put away. Matthew suggested a moveable camera, positioned on a tripod, may be a helpful option in addition to fixed installations, and that an installer would be able to provide additional information. Bill asked if any session action was needed to proceed. B&G provided its blessing during the testing meeting yielding the footage just seen. MOTION: That we contract with the camera installer who provided us with a quote.

Heidi loves our virtual services and asked whether the need for the new video work related to the step-by-step worship video approach that probably is time-consuming. She also expressed concern about possible obsolescence in five years. She and Rod both asked about funding. Matthew confirmed that the current work is very time consuming for Bill, the music staff, and volunteers, due in part to recording and assembling various parts of the service at different times. Working with an installed system would make the recording process more streamlined. The Video Project's technology choices are not 4K but should provide longevity. There is a tech fund that should be enough depending on meeting with installer. Bill allayed concerns about funding.

MOTION was M/S/C unanimously.

Nominating Committee

Barb reported that the committee met on the 6th and 18th. Committee members are Nancy Acree, Fred Braun, Mary Anne Bromelmeier, Beth Holbein, Kitty Jarjisian, Marilyn Langmack, Harriet Wadsworth (trustee rep), Paul Williams (deacon rep). Health issues are precluding some committee member

participation at all meetings. Bill added that he doubts our membership numbers are as high as the rolls seem to indicate. We will need to clear our member rolls before we have a new pastor.

Trustees report

Two requests from trustees for the agenda: That session form a self-study committee by April 1, 2021; and that session form a pastor nominating committee by August 1, 2021.

Bill feels that part of this relates to being an anxious congregation. No trustees were present at the meeting. Bill commented that it is the congregation, and not the session, who form a pastor nominating committee; and that it is the PWR's Committee on Ministry who approve a congregation embarking on a self study and who approve the self study before approving the formation of a pastor nominating committee. An interim pastor does not lead a self study, as was mentioned in the trustees meeting; a representative from the PWR COM works on the self study and the PNC.

Barb remembered that at one point it was intended for session to take one section of the Sustainability report and do a deep dive each month. Bill suggested starting that at the March session meeting.

Bill asked how session wishes to treat the trustees request. He believes the timetable is too soon. June also said that we should be very cautious about a timetable. PWR has to approve a self study before a PNC can begin. Chris suggested taking a few minutes to discuss it at the joint meeting.

Rod commented that he has a significant interest in and understanding of Covenant's corporate governance. Self studies and PNCs have nothing to do with the work of trustees.

Sybil believes the Sustainability report may help inform the self study.

Bill asked if anything about the building was in the Sustainability report. Sybil recalled that the building came up, as an asset and a limitation. Bill will meet with the Sustainability committee.

Anne asked if being on the National Register of Historic Places limits what we may do with the building. Chris said no, but the building also is a Cleveland Landmark. We had to hire a Dayton company to work on the Fiberglas finial project years ago because no Cleveland company wanted to come up against the Cleveland Landmarks Commission.

Bill said he was hearing that the February discussion needed to include the impulse being felt regarding how soon we can be starting a self study and PNC.

Deacons

Julie mentioned how anxious deacons are to have the members back in the building. Deacons have provided lunches and cookies for frontline workers. They plan a Feb. 10 Valentine's lunch for Covenant staff. She expressed thanks for the excellent volunteer work of deacon John Marsh as virtual worship service videographer, with his own equipment, for months, and session members heartily agreed.

Bill mentioned the activities of the Reopening Task Force. Sybil said they will make more regular communications, including at least monthly releases of information to members. Matthew said the group will meet once a month, pointing members to pandemic-related resources and updating them on building access.

The meeting adjourned and closed with prayer at 9:01 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Denise Horstman, clerk