

Presbytery of Southern New England
Commission on Ministry

*Recommendation to establish an Administrative Commission
for the Greenwood Community Presbyterian Church in Warwick, RI*

The Committee on Ministry recommends that the Presbytery **ESTABLISH** an Administrative Commission to work in partnership with the Session of the Greenwood Community Presbyterian Church in Warwick, RI, at their own request, in a letter from the Clerk of Session dated April 23, 2024¹ notifying the Presbytery of an establishment of a Task Force of the Session to discern disaffiliation with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and moving their membership to another Reformed denomination, which was formed in September 2023:

1. To respond pastorally to members of the Congregation and its leadership during their time of grief and heartbreak after the sudden loss of their beloved, and longtime pastor, the Rev. Dr. Stephen Clark.
2. To, alongside the Moderator, advise the Session and its Clerk and to resource it on best practices and process in accordance with the Constitution of the PCUSA, Robert's Rules of Order and additional resources of the Presbytery in times of conflict and challenge.
3. To work collegially through the process outlined in the "[Discerning the Way](#)" policy of the Presbytery and oversee its implementation.
4. The orderly dismissal of members to other congregations of their choosing if requested.
5. The securing, holding, and using of the properties of the congregation through the process outlined in "Discerning the Way."
6. Under the terms of the "Discerning the Way" to report to the Presbytery about the sale or disposition of such property.
7. To request, receive and review any and all materials, documents and information, including financial statements, so as to appropriately do its work collegially with the Session and Trustees of the Congregation.
8. The assumption of original jurisdiction, at an appropriate time determined by the AC, in accordance with Book of Order G-3.0303e, which includes but is not limited to Personnel and Trustee matters.
9. To have full power as per the Book of Order G-4.0207, to if necessary, declare a schism and determine the true remnant.

Background and rationale: In September 2023 the Session voted to form a Task Force to discern next steps for the congregation in terms of its membership in/out of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) due to the expected retirement in 2024 of the Rev. Dr. Stephen Clark. During the fall of 2023 and early 2024, Rev. Clark's health deteriorated, following a short leave of absence he took in mid-2023 to seek medical treatment in Ohio. In early February of 2024 Rev. Clark corresponded with the Presbytery to notify us of his deteriorating health, and to request that the Rev. Christine Foster be appointed Moderator of Session if he became unable to fulfill those duties. At the same time the COM learned that Rev. Clark had been quite unwell since December 2023 and unable to fulfill the work of his pastoral office following Christmas and that

¹ See supporting documents.

there were other items including a line of credit against the investments of the Congregation and a cell phone tower on the property of which the Presbytery was unaware. As of this date, both administrative items have been dealt with appropriately by the Presbytery Trustees. At the February meeting of the COM, the Rev. Christine Foster was appointed Moderator, and at the same time, Rev. Clark entered the hospital. On March 8, 2024 the Rev. Steve Clark passed away.

At present:

1. Greenwood Community Presbyterian Church in Warwick, RI has 265 active members. Of these numbers, their weekly attendance is approximately 100 people in person with about 15 online.
2. The leadership of the Session is strained, grief-stricken, and overwhelmed with the multiple sudden duties which have been thrust upon them, whereas they had depended upon the Rev. Clark for much leadership prior to his untimely death. There is interpersonal and theological conflict within the Session.
3. The Session is filling the pulpit week to week and they are working with the COM to engage the services of a Bridge Pastor during this time of discernment. They are working through personnel issues related to filling the pulpit, as the current Director of Music and majority of the choir will not attend worship if the person filling the pulpit is not male. The Rev. Christine Foster did fill the pulpit on one Sunday and on Maundy Thursday since the death of the Rev. Clark at the request of the Session but the music director and choir were not present and outside music leadership had to be secured.
4. The Commission on Ministry directed the Stated Clerk of the Presbytery to send two letters² to the Session in April 2024 regarding the polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) related to gender parity in ordained leadership. This has been disregarded. The Session is continuing to only place men in the pulpit (ruling and teaching elders) and has decided to allow the preferences of the music director, rather than the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to have authority.
5. The needs of the Session leadership for partnership and guidance at this time is high. The first Moderator appointed to the Session by the COM, the Rev. Christine Foster, worked with them for a little under two months. The COM has now appointed the Rev. Pamela Spence-Bakker as Moderator and the first few meetings she has moderated have both needed a second person to attend alongside her for support and featured many visitors at each meeting with specific requests of the Session. This has been disruptive to the work of the Session who despite their challenges, is working diligently in this time of transition and grief. The Session itself is split in terms of decision-making and there are some elders on Session who have openly dismissed the polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to which they have taken ordination vows, including concerns voiced that most clergy in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are atheist, that the complete and correct Westminster Confession is not included in the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and voiced inaccuracies about the ordination process, interfaith relationships, christology and the parity of men and women in ordained leadership.

² See supporting documents.

6. On June 5, 2024 at a called Special Meeting of the Session, the Session voted to receive the report, findings, information and recommendations³ from the Ecclesiastical Task Force around whether or not to disaffiliate with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) they appointed in September 2023. There are many inaccuracies and misinformation in this report that remain unaddressed. The Session ultimately decided to receive the report and keep the Task Force in place to work with the Presbytery Listening Team/AC once appointed. They did not approve the dissemination of the report to the Congregation. The Session struggled throughout this meeting in significant ways with their relationships with each other, their own Task Force, and it is clear that conflict in the leadership of the Congregation is very high.
7. There are other lingering conflicts in the Congregation related to theological and social differences, which has caused some to no longer attend worship and withhold giving.

Supporting Documents:

1. Letter dated April 3, 2024 from Stated Clerk the Rev. Kate Carlisle to Clerk of Session Ruling Elder Elaine Magyar.
2. Letter dated April 23, 2024 from Stated Clerk the Rev. Kate Carlisle to Clerk of Session Ruling Elder Elaine Magyar.
3. Letter dated April 26, 2024 from Clerk of Session Ruling Elder Elaine Magyar to Stated Clerk the Rev. Kate Carlisle.
4. Report of the Ecclesiastical Relations Task Force (report and protest packet background information) formed by the Session of the Greenwood Community Presbyterian Church on September 19, 2023. This report was reviewed, discussed and received by the Session on June 5, 2024.
5. Discerning the Way policy of the Presbytery of Southern New England.

³ See supporting documents.