

## PRESBYTERY SUMMARY REPORT OF JAMES FENIMORE WITH COUNCIL RESPONSE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For the past five months the Presbytery Council has been working with the Rev. Dr. James Fenimore, a congregational consultant with the Samaritan Counseling Center. What follows is his summary of what he has learned about our Presbytery and what we plan to do based on these observations.

Throughout the Presbytery there is a high level of anxiety. The decades long decline in membership and finances has taken its toll on the Presbytery. Although this is not unique to our Presbytery it does impact us significantly. The high anxiety keeps us from feeling connected as we focus more on our local church than the connection we have with one another as a Presbytery. It also impacts our discourse as we become more reactive diminishing our ability to work with each other. It even can lead to more and more decisions being made by small numbers of people outside of the governing structures of our Presbytery because we do not trust one another to make these decisions.

Our governing structures have also become issue-centered as opposed to system-centered. This means that we can get caught up in the details of a particular issue and debate it vigorously without looking at how the issue or even the debate itself impacts the entire Presbytery. It is what might be referred to as we “Can’t see the forest through the trees.”

For many reasons, including those above, there are churches and individuals who have felt as though they are outsiders of the Presbytery. Some of these reasons include: geography (feeling too far removed from Albany); theology (feeling outside the dominate liberal/progressive theological majority); and size (feeling that the Presbytery is only focused on large churches). Those who have felt as outsiders have disconnected or significantly lessened their role in the Presbytery.

Finally, it was discovered that the Presbytery historically has a pattern of endorsing individuals who are seen as a “savior” to solve some particular problem (e.g. finances) and that these persons at some point abuse their power and violate boundaries becoming a figure supported by some and vilified by others. Although the actions of these individuals may be well intentioned their abuse of their power is highly troubling. At some point, usually when they no longer have power (or perceived power) they are vilified by all and scapegoated as “the problem”. This somewhat vague description of the process probably resonates with you and you may be able to think of some examples of individuals who fit this description. This troubling pattern requires us to each take responsibility for the future of the Presbytery and not to look for a “savior” or blame someone for the problems that exist.

### COUNCIL RESPONSE

The Council affirms the findings of both Jim’s Executive Summary Report to Council and the above summary report to Presbytery. Both point to changes that need to occur that relate to

the connectional and relational issues related to Presbytery life. In addition, Jim's report affirms the Holy Cow findings that trust is an area to be addressed especially in regards to retired Teaching Elders and also Teaching elders feeling isolated in their calls.

To address this, the Council recommends

1. That retired Teaching Elders gather for an annual luncheon hosted by the Presbytery and be encouraged to gather more often through the course a year for fellowship and support.
2. Evaluate and possibly re-design the pastoral care support network for our Teaching Elders.
3. Establish regional collegial groups that will meet quarterly for the purpose of ministry sharing, building relationships, and mutual support. Presbytery staff may be invited to these groups for the sole purpose of listening and offering resourcing and support.

Jim's report also points to the high amount of reactivity in decision making processes in the life of the presbytery and the propensity for certain groups or individuals that seek to control or manipulate decision making, leading to systemic distrust. To address this, the Council recommends:

1. After all first readings, the Presbytery break into small listening circles where questions and strengths and weaknesses are addressed and then presented to the full body by circle facilitators. This will encourage greater discussion and give all Teaching and Ruling elders a chance for their voice to be heard in a less intimidating atmosphere.
2. Evaluate and re-examine the covenant of participation of Teaching and Ruling elders in the life of the Presbytery, with continued emphasis on term limits and rollover of membership on committees and commissions. New members of the presbytery have one year to get acclimated and assimilated and then will be asked to participate in an area of presbytery related to their giftedness. In that year, the presbytery will be intentional in building relationship and community with the new Teaching Elder. In the movement to new ministry plan and structure, the role of the Nominating Committee will be vital in this area of greater accountability and ownership of all members of the presbytery.