

PRT Summary of Discernment Phase Assessment

8/2/2017

Presbytery DISCERNMENT Team/Presbytery Response Team DISCERNMENT Phase

Discernment Meeting Assessment (Part A):

The PDT discernment meeting took place as required in the new GDP, Discernment Phase, lines 169-209. Questions and discussion centered on the spiritual, financial and collegial health of ELMO, in light of the many leaderships, staff and financial changes in the past 3 years: Including during Jeff Bridgeman's tenure, during Jay Shirley's tenure, and current status with transitional pastoral team; as well as thoughts for their future of going forward or stepping back. The PDT also included questions of possible reconciliation with the PC(USA).

+**During Jeff Bridgeman's tenure:** Not so much while Jeff was interim, but in the called installed position, there was growing tension, lack of trust of pastor and session members. No upfront elder or deacon leadership in worship.

+**During Jay Shirley's tenure** (note: Jay was previous associate): Jay helped to stabilize where the church is going; set new objectives; revamped and revitalized committees, set new overall goals. This has resulted in bringing the leadership back together and the congregation back to together; consistent and transparent communication; the building of confidence and trust, a sense of well-being.

Out of this deepening sense of trust there has been a growing ownership of ministry by the congregation. This new focus on meaning of "church" and how to implement in the community has led to several ad hoc groups being formed resulting in: Regular potluck meals; Friends of Foster Families; Widow's Luncheons (hosted by a non-widow); Early School Community Talks; Regularly feeding the homeless. There are also on-going and growing women's and men's Bible Study/support groups.

Rev. Bob Ohman did a sermon series on Spiritual Gifts and with the on-line test, "helped people to be open to beginning new ministries, using their gifts that they identified in themselves." The session grows closer and stronger. They have instituted the new Mission Statement *Following Jesus, We Love, Connect, Care and Serve...* and are living it out. They participate in Sunday morning worship leadership. The Worship Committee initiated the "Home/Sing" Ministry: going to the home bound, taking communion on Communion Sundays and singing hymns with the folk, even when clergy cannot make it.

+**Current Status, with Transitional Pastors:** It was unanimous that in the celebration of Jay Shirley leaving (again) at the end of his contract, this "departure was on a positive, uplifting note, due to the strong leadership Jay provided and the new spirit among the congregation." Many and recent prior departures have been without joy and celebration.

There have been new members brought in as well as a confirmation class and several baptisms. The Nominating Committee feels positive about approaching candidates for ordained positions. There is also a positive feeling about approaching any future candidates for the position as their new pastor, because they will be coming into an organization with lots of momentum.

The clergy transition duo: Rev. Bob Ohman, transitional preaching pastor and Rev. Barry Moller, transitional administrative pastor work well as a team – carrying forth the stability, strength and spirit of Jay’s legacy. The staff has expressed “they flourished under Jay and that feeling is continuing.” The congregation, staff and ministry teams are enthusiastic about the Lord, each other, their leadership and their community. From the first meeting between PRT and the session, their trust in God has grown, the fear is gone, the uncertainty is gone and the feeling is positive.

+Their future of going forward or stepping back: The feeling of “going forward no matter the process” is strong. Even though the overall feeling over the years has been that El Montecito has never been fully committed to PCUSA, they feel and believe this process of the past almost 3 years has made them strong within, in and for the community at large, individually, corporately and spiritually.

On July 26 and July 30 “identical” PDT open forums were held to accommodate the congregation (***GDP, lines 189-193***).

Discernment Phase Assessment (Part B)

This part of the Discernment Phase was divided into two open forums – to accommodate the folks and their schedules. Forum 1a was Wednesday night, July 26; Forum 1b was Sunday, July 30. A few elders were present at both. Three or four people attended both. At both Forums Janet read from the new GDP, Discernment Phase, pg 5, lines 175-190: After hearing from the Stated Clerk, the Presbytery Council shall form a Presbytery Discernment Team (PDT) to meet with the Session and individually with the pastors to listen and understand the following: (1) Overall spiritual health of the organization and leadership of the church, and (2) History of the church’s relationship with the Presbytery. Accordingly, the Presbytery needs to inquire and make an informed judgment as to the possibilities of reconciliation. Some of the ways to help determine this are: 1) what or who is preventing the reconciliation; approximately how many people are determined to leave and how many wish to remain in the PC(USA); 2) does the congregation understand what it is being asked to consider and have the implications of leaving the PC(USA) been fully and fairly explained; 3) and has the process been open and fair to all concerned? This assessment shall be made via open forums and discussion. It is important that the process of discernment be conducted in a way that seeks the truth and is fair to all parties.

At both Forums: After acknowledging the past 2 or 3 years has been frustrating for the congregation, including the delays, trauma and drama of the past year, we also stated that at the very first PRT meeting with Session, March 2015, the resulting assessment was an unhealthy church, beginning with leadership; now they have experienced leadership and staff changes, decreased attendance and cut budget; and currently in a transitional pastoral team. Therefore, the presenting question for the Forums was: What is different now in the life and health of ELMO versus 2 or 3 years ago?

Forum 1a: PRT members present were Diane Kirkpatrick, Ted Brandt and Ch Janet Loughry

Generally, the consensus from those present (30) with prolonged delays, the drop in attendance and members has put a huge strain on ELMO. There is no consensus for any sort of reconciliation as expressed by a few and agreed on by the others, that ELMO is very disappointed in the GA and PCUSA. They feel PCUSA has left them, not the other way round. ELMO has been very evangelical through its history. Feel more so, since “fiasco at recent GA’s” (Sophia issue and theological decline). The people experienced negativity, and non-encouragement during Jeff Bridgeman’s tenure. The opposite was experienced with Jay Shirley during his 21 months as interim, including because of Jay’s ministry care to hospitalized, and home bound, the people are now caring more for each other. They cited many of same ministries that session did during that meeting. Those new include: the week-long Children’s Art Camp hosted and run by ELMO just week prior with over 75 kids and youth, plus another 24 college and adult

staff and volunteers in every aspect of the week. The kids, more than half present were from the community at large, were taught and experienced the life of Christ and the call to follow Christ through the medium of art and the examples of the leaders; With the other churches in the area ELMO supports the local fire and police departments during actual disasters, plus raising funds for meds and other supplies; and finally, the prayer shawl ministry has been a going concern for some time, now they have included pregnant moms through early school and parents and kids ill or need comforting.

Forum 1b: PRT Ch Janet and Council Ch Sandy Thoits were present

Generally, this group expressed much as did the Forum 1a. There was a stronger statement of no room for reconciliation. Sandy made the comment that there is value in diversity and learning from each other and that we, this presbytery, do agree that Jesus is our savior, and we are going into a brand new development of the presbytery, together. Their desire to leave is a matter of conscience, not wanting to be swayed by cultural trends; wanting the larger church to stop watering down the message of the Gospel in order to bring in more people.

Sandy asked what they were looking for in their new pastor. Remarks included: preaching, pastoral care, humility/servant heart, empathetic, evangelical, attitude/ability to reach out to young people and present to Bible to appeal to young people.

This group expressed the fact they are sticking with ELMO and each other. They know they cannot just “sit here and think” but must go out, be outward thinkers and actors in taking the gospel out.

The assessment of the PRT is that there is energy, a feeling of love, growth and mutual support. There has been a genuine effort on everyone’s part to claim Jesus in a new way, spreading Jesus within their church family and throughout the community...living out Jesus’ Gospel message. Even though the congregation is down from 350 to 179; and the financial picture has been a deficit for the past two years; and even though they believe they will break even in 2017, they are a stronger, more stable, energized-for-Jesus congregation. It is the Assessment Recommendation of the PDT/PRT that El Montecito Presbyterian Church be granted permission to be dismissed to another Reformed body.