

Presbytery of the Highlands  
Stated Meeting  
November 14, 2023  
Administration and Coordinating Team Report –  
Part 2

**Items for Consent Agenda:**

None.

**Items for Action:**

None.

**Items for Report:**

*From the October 5, 2023 Called meeting:*

**ACT-15**

Approved a recommendation from the Committee on Ministry for an Administrative Commission for the Long Valley Presbyterian Church. See attached.

**ACT-16**

Approved a recommendation from the Committee on Ministry for an Administrative Commission for the Presbyterian Church of Morris Plains. See attached.

Addendum:

ACT-17

Moderator Tom Brown appointed the following:

Administrative Commission for Long Valley Presbyterian Church

- Rev. Daniel Vigilante – Morristown
- Rev. Stefanie Muntzel – Stirling/Gillette
- Rev. Amy Lincoln – Flemington
- Elder Jeanne Perry – Chester
- Elder Ken Nickel – Boonton

Administrative Commission for Morris Plains

- Rev. Robin Burton Palmer – Highlands

- Rev. Nancy Nalepo-Skibo – Somerset
- Elder Sherrie Guthrie – Morristown
- Elder Carl Woodward – Chatham Township
- Rev. Bill Stone – New Vernon

The Warrant for the Administrative Commission to the Long Valley  
Presbyterian Church  
September 30, 2023

## **Introduction**

The Presbytery is given the authority in our polity to “nurture the covenant community of Christ... promoting the peace and harmony of the congregations, and inquiring into sources of congregational discord; supporting congregations in developing the graces of generosity, stewardship, and service; assisting congregations in developing mission and participating in the mission of the whole church;... warning and bearing witness against error in doctrine and immaturity in practice within its bounds; and serving in judicial matters in accordance with the rules of discipline (G-3.0303d).”

In exercising this authority, the Committee on Ministry has made a deliberate inquiry into the situation at the Long Valley Presbyterian Church. This inquiry began in May 2023, after the pastor of Long Valley and the Chair of Personnel reached out to the COM, individually and independently, for assistance in addressing discord between the pastor and session and among members of the congregation.

This COM inquiry consisted of sending a team of three COM members to meet with the pastor and elders to assess the level of concern that existed. Following their initial work the Team requested that the entire COM approve an immediate Leave for the pastor for medical reasons. The Leave began on June 18<sup>th</sup> and would be for at least 90 days.

In addition to the Leave, the COM also approved the hiring of a Clergy Coach and Consultant to work with the Pastor and the Session throughout the summer of 2023.

The COM team believes progress is being made, but ongoing and continued support from the Presbytery will be needed.

In our connectional polity we are well-suited to provide such support for one another in times of trouble. In order for continued support to be most effective and also to act on behalf of the Presbytery and with the Presbytery’s full authority, it requires technical language of a warrant for an Administrative Commission.

## **Next Steps and Ongoing Support**

This document describes the ways in which the Commission will support, protect, and encourage the Long Valley Presbyterian Church’s “Ministry under the Word.” The Committee on Ministry, the Stated Clerk, and the Presbytery Leader remain committed to achieving resolution and reconciliation to the greatest extent possible.

The Committee on Ministry has determined, at its electronic meeting of October 3, 2023, that significant work still needs to be done at the Long Valley Presbyterian Church so that the ministry of the Word is not placed in

jeopardy. *It therefore requests that the Presbytery of the Highlands of New Jersey, acting through its Administrative Commission, create and empower an Administrative Commission.*

Among the responsibilities given to an Administrative Commission in our polity are the following: visiting particular councils, congregations or agencies over which they have immediate jurisdiction reported to be affected with disorder, and to inquire into and settle the difficulties therein, except that no commission shall have the power to dissolve a pastoral relationship unless such power has been specifically delegated to it by the appointing body (G-3.0109b(5)).

### **Recommendations**

The Committee on Ministry recommends that the Presbytery appoint an Administrative Commission to assist the Session and Congregation on the next steps in their journey.

The Administrative Commission for Long Valley Presbyterian Church will have the following authority and responsibilities:

1. To continue the work of the COM Team, working with the Pastor and Session in an advisory and supportive role while they discern their future together.
2. The AC shall have access to all records and documents which pertain to the life and mission of the Long Valley Presbyterian Church, without limitation, including all financial documents and accounts, personal records and other documents that as they are needed or required to their work.
3. The AC shall assist the Session of the Long Valley Presbyterian Church in the fulfillment of its responsibilities listed in G-3.0201. The Commission members shall serve alongside the session members of advising them and encouraging them as they fulfill their responsibilities. The AC may have the authority to vote at session meetings only if necessary.
4. To inquire into any continuing or emerging difficulties occurring in the Long Valley Presbyterian Church, affording to all interested parties fair notice and an opportunity to be heard on the matters at issue, in accordance with G-3.0109b, the Commission shall use its discretion in ensuring that all concerned parties have all pertinent documents communicated to them, The Commission shall conduct its business in the open, without undue secrecy, At the same time, the Commission shall take seriously any evidence or allegations of wrongdoing in the life of this church by any party,

5. To settle whatever difficulties may be discovered or emerge, acting on behalf of the Presbytery, which is "responsible for the mission and government of the church throughout its geographical district." In carrying out this responsibility, the Administrative Commission, acting on behalf of Presbytery, is hereby empowered:

a. To provide pastoral care for the First Presbyterian Church in a time of crisis, conflict, and uncertainty. This shall include praying with and for the congregation, Session, Pastor, and his family;

b. Encouraging communication among the participants in the church's life;

c. Seeking opportunities to recommend services of confession, healing, and reconciliation; and

d. Directing all participants in the church's life to a renewed encounter with the demands of God's Word,

This Administrative Commission shall report to presbytery at least every six months, beginning in November 2023, Furthermore, it shall report to the COM through the church's liaison, on a monthly basis,

The Administrative Commission may at any time request additional responsibilities and authorities that they may need to assist the Long Valley Presbyterian Church in moving forward with their mission and ministry.

Membership in this Administrative Commission shall be by appointment of the Moderator of Presbytery, in consultation with the Committee on Ministry, the Stated Clerk and the Presbytery Leader.

If requested by the Administrative Commission, the Presbytery of the Highlands of New Jersey, shall secure Counsel for their work.

ADMINISTRATIVE COMMISSION for Presbyterian Church of Morris Plains.  
October 2, 2023

## **Introduction**

On September 3 and 4, the Committee on Ministry (COM) liaison, the Presbytery Leader, and the Stated Clerk began receiving phone calls, text messages, and emails from parents and staff of Joyful Noise Nursery School, a ministry program of Presbyterian Church of Morris Plains (PCMP). They also received numerous phone calls, text messages and emails from members and staff of the Presbyterian Church of Morris Plains. The presenting issue appeared to be the unexpected resignation of the Joyful Noise Nursery School (JNNS) director days before the beginning of the school year.

Over the next few days following the initial contacts additional communications raised concerns in the following areas:

- Areas of Financial concerns including lack of transparency, and alleged misuse of funds and questionable accounting practices.
- Suggestion of Personnel Issues including inconsistencies and confusion regarding the relationship between the church and JNNS, false allegations, lack of clarity concerning personnel policy, slowness of response to personnel issues and stories of harassment of staff and volunteers. The Pastor and Personnel Committee shared concerns about the behavior of the Preschool director prior to her resignation.
- Confusion and lack of communication about the departure of the Preschool director. Parents sent a petition only to be met with silence or brief responses that did not provide clarity or interest in resolving their requests.

The Presbytery Leader shared these concerns with the COM on September 5, two members of the COM volunteered to be part of the initial team to review the communications and information. They met on September 7 and on September 8 sent an email to the Moderator/Pastor and Clerk of Session requesting a meeting immediately along with a request for documents that possibly could shed light on the concerns. On September 9 at the Presbytery meeting, the Clerk of Session informed the Presbytery Leader that neither she nor the pastor could make themselves available to meet the following week.

On September 13 the Pastor called the Presbytery Leader indicating that they needed legal assistance because the director of the preschool downloaded and deleted sensitive preschool documents days prior to her resignation. At that time the Presbytery Leader indicated that they would get back to the Session after they have reviewed the documents requested and

also said that the Session and Pastor were to maintain the status quo until a time when things could be sorted out.

The requested documents, which included financial information, minutes, structure/organization information, and personnel info, was received via hard copies at the Presbytery office on Friday, September 15. Additional information was requested and received on September 27. The COM team reviewed the information and determined that there are significant questions and concerns that warranted a more in-depth review of the issues, accusations and concerns relating to Morris Plains Session and its organization including its relationship with Joyful Noise Nursery School. After consulting with the Stated Clerk, COM liaison and one co-moderator of COM, it was determined that an Administrative Commission was needed. On September 28 the Moderator/Pastor and Clerk of Session along with other members of Session invited by the Pastor, met with the Presbytery Leader and COM Team to be informed that Team will be recommending to COM on Tuesday, October 3 that an Administrative Commission be appointed and that the ACT will be meeting on October 5 to act on the COM request. On September 29, late afternoon, it was brought to the attention of the COM team that the Pastor had called an emergency meeting for Saturday, September 30, with JNNS parents and staff to respond to their concerns. On Friday, September 29 the Pastor and others met with an attorney and had a "cease and desist" letter developed and sent to the former director of the JNNS accusing her of downloading/deleting JNNS information from the JNNS server. The COM team was not informed of any of these actions or the potential repercussions of these actions. It is unclear whether the session met, discussed/debated the merits or content of the letter. The Presbytery Leader was informed with a brief email, after inquiring about session action, that the session had approved the letter. The Pastor and Personnel Committee met with the parents and staff on September 30. The COM team has determined that there is a need to investigate and review the actions and concerns and accusations of Presbyterian Church of Morris Plains Session and Pastor along with a review of the issues concerning the relationship between PCMP and the JNNS.

### **Purpose**

The Purpose of the Administrative Commission for Presbyterian Church of Morris Plains is to review the work and actions of the session and moderator of the church as relating to the Book of Order G -3.0108

### G-3.0108 Administrative Review

Higher councils shall review the work of lower councils in the following ways:

a. General Administrative Review

Each council shall review annually or biennially, based on the body's meeting frequency, the proceedings and actions of all entities related to the body, all officers able to act on behalf of the body, and lower councils within its jurisdiction. In reviewing the procedures of the lower council, the higher body shall determine whether the proceedings have been correctly recorded, have been in accordance with the Constitution, have been prudent and equitable, and have been faithful to the mission of the whole church. It shall also determine whether lawful injunctions of a higher body have been obeyed.

b. Special Administrative Review

If a higher council learns at any time of alleged irregularity or delinquency of a lower council, it may require the lower body to produce any records and to take appropriate action.

c. Directed Response

The higher council may direct the lower council to reconsider and take corrective action if matters are determined to be out of compliance. In addition to administrative review, review and correction may be sought by initiating judicial process as described in the Church Discipline.

G-3.0303 Relations with Sessions

Presbytery, being composed of the ministers of the Word and Sacrament and commissioners elected by the session of congregations within its district, has a particular responsibility to coordinate, guide, encourage, support, and resource the work of its congregations for the most effective witness to the broader community. In order to accomplish this responsibility, the presbytery has authority to:

d. Counsel with a session concerning reported difficulties within a congregation, including:

1. Advising the session as to appropriate actions to be taken to resolve the reported difficulties. 2. Offering to help as a mediator, and 3. Acting to correct the difficulties if requested to do so by the session or if the session is unable or unwilling to do so, following the procedural safeguards of the Church Discipline.

Administrative Commission responsibilities and authority:

The Administrative Commission (AC) for Presbyterian Church of Morris Plains shall have the following powers and responsibilities:

- To visit the Presbyterian Church of Morris Plains, Morris Plains, NJ and to inquire into the concerns of the Session, Congregation members, parents and staff of Joyful Noise Preschool. Their inquiries may include hearing the concerns and issues of present and former congregation members, active participants of JNNS, present and former staff members and volunteers and others that the Commission feels need to be heard and/or who can provide helpful information.



- The AC shall have access to all records and documents which pertain to the life and mission of the Morris Plains Presbyterian Church and Joyful Noise Nursery School, without limitation, including all financial documents and accounts, personnel files of past and present staff and volunteers.
- The AC shall have the authority to resolve whatever difficulties or issues may be discovered, acting on behalf of the Presbytery, which is “responsible for the mission of the government of the church throughout its geographical district.” In carrying out this responsibility, the Administrative Commission, is empowered and authorized:
  - To provide coordination and guidance for the Presbyterian Church of Morris Plains, assisting the church in mobilizing its strength for making the most effective witness to Jesus Christ. (G-3.0303a)
  - To assist in assessment of leadership capacity and potential leadership development within the congregation.
  - To “take appropriate action to correct any irregularity or delinquency it may discover.” (G-3.0303d)(3) and if necessary consult with the Stated Clerk of the Presbytery on any issues that they may uncover related to Church Discipline in the Book of Order.
- The AC is to provide pastoral care for the Morris Plains Presbyterian Church in a time of crisis, conflict, and uncertainty. This shall include praying with and for the congregation, the session, the preschool staff and the pastor and his family; encouraging communication among the participants in the church’s life; seeking opportunities for church members and participants to discern, share and vision where God is calling them into the future.
- The AC may order - if it determines, after a thorough investigation and consultation with the Committee on Ministry, and after an opportunity to be heard has been accorded to the session, - that the presbytery assume original jurisdiction over Presbyterian Church of Morris Plains.

The AC shall assist the Session of the Presbyterian Church in Morris Plains in the fulfillment of its responsibilities listed in G-3.0201. The Commission members shall serve alongside the session members of Morris Plains Presbyterian Church, with vote if needed, advising them and encouraging them as they fulfill their responsibilities. If necessary, the Administrative Commission may request that The Committee on Ministry appoint the moderator pro tem.

The Administrative Commission shall report in writing to the Presbytery at

least every six months. The COM liaison will provide monthly reports to the Committee on Ministry.

Membership in this Administrative Commission shall be by appointment of the Moderator of Presbytery, in consultation with the Committee on Ministry, the Stated Clerk and the Presbytery Leader.

The Administrative Commission may at any time request additional responsibilities and authorities that they may need to assist the Morris Plains Presbyterian Church in moving forward with their mission and ministry.