

**MOUNT PLEASANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA)**  
**Stated Session Meeting Digest**  
**February 23, 2021**

**CALL TO ORDER, OPENING DEVOTIONAL AND PRAYER, AND ADMINISTRATIVE ITEMS**

The meeting was held via Zoom videoconference. Pastor Peter Bynum moderated the meeting and called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m. The moderator declared that a quorum was present. James Scott offered the opening devotional prayer.

**CONSENT AGENDA**

The following items were approved:

- A. Approval of minutes: January 26, 2020 stated meeting  
January 31, 2020 called meeting to receive new members
- B. Approval of excused absences
- C. Membership changes
- D. Approve a recommendation from the Congregational Nominating Committee to postpone the annual meeting of the congregation to March 28
- E. Approve the 2021 Communion schedule
  - January 3
  - February 7
  - March 7
  - April 4 - Easter
  - May 2
  - June 6
  - July 4
  - August 1
  - September 5
  - October 3 - World Communion Sunday
  - November 7
  - December 5
  - December 8 or 15 - Travelers' Service
  - Dec. 24 - Christmas Eve 6:00, 8:00 & 11:00 service

**CLERK'S REPORT**

- The Lord's Supper was celebrated on February 7, 2021
- Session minutes for 2019 were examined by the Committee on Ministry and approved without exception.
- Charleston Atlantic Presbytery Winter Stated meeting is Saturday February 27 at 10:15 a.m.
- An additional Elder of the Month is needed for March

**SPECIAL ORDER**

Rev. Dan Holloway of Pinnacle Leadership Associates made a few remarks and answered questions about his report. The report is appended to this digest.

**ACTION ITEMS FROM COMMITTEES** The following items were approved:

- **Missions Committee** MPPC's formal membership in the Charleston Area Justice Ministry as a covenanted congregation.
- **The Pinnacle Work Group**
  - 1) That the Session adopt the Proposed Session Covenant developed by the Pinnacle Group to be renewed, and if necessary revised, each time a new class of elders joins the Session.
  - 2) That the Session adopt the Proposed Standing Rules for Session Meetings developed by the Pinnacle Group.
  - 3) That the Session adopt a more flexible format for monthly meeting agendas that will allow meeting time to be allocated in a more productive manner.
  - 4) That new officer training be structured so as to include and encourage the participation of current sitting elders.
  - 5) That mentoring circles be formed that include one elder from each current class. As a member from one class rotates off the Session an elder from the incoming class will join the circle.
    - The **Property and Grounds Committee** moved that

- a. Youth activities on campus be re-opened for Sunday in the Fellowship Hall; maintaining COVID protocols and with the Youth Ministry team cleaning up and wiping down after the activity and maintaining an attendance list for 30 days after each event for potential contact tracking.
- b. Vacation Bible School (VBS) be scheduled for August 2021 with the VBS team enforcing COVID protocols at that time, with a reduced capacity, maximum use of outdoor activities, and Zoom options for participation.

**INFORMATIONAL ITEMS**

\*Christian Education: The Christian Education Committee has prepared a curriculum approval process that will be presented at the March stated meeting. Lori Baney has been hired as the new Director of the Learning Center. There are 245 participants in 20 Lenten small groups.

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\*Finance: As of January 31, 2011:

	Actual YTD	Budgeted YTD	%
Total Revenues	\$181,956.77	\$222,584.00	6.36%
Total Expenses	\$214,264.62	\$274,694.09	7.48%
Net Total	(\$ 32,307.85)	(\$52,110.09)	

Balances as of 12/31/2020:

Operating \$236,361; Temporary Restricted \$445,508; Endowment \$1,227,146

## Pinnacle Leadership Report to the Session

Mt. Pleasant Presbyterian Church

February 10, 2021

### **Introduction**

This report is written with deep gratitude for the privilege of working in partnership with the session and staff of Mt. Pleasant Presbyterian Church from January 2020 to January 2021. MPPC is a deeply gifted church with a remarkable impact on the lives of its members and community. Those who have answered God's call to serve within this community of faith have an impact that extends far beyond what even they may imagine. Indeed, my strongest impression of this church is of its strength and vitality, even when there have been challenges to be addressed. It has been my privilege to walk beside you in this journey.

Context always matters for a report like this and it must be noted that 2020 was difficult for all faith communities, including challenges coming from the unprecedented and continuing impact of the Corona virus and the disintegration of healthy conversation in the political arena. Simply put, this has been a challenging time to lead a church and churches everywhere have struggled to determine the best ways forward. Changes in worship practice, shifting of attendance patterns, loss of income, questions about priorities, and debates about the work and role of church leaders have been common across the religious landscape. The fact that churches have adapted and continued their work as well as they have is to be celebrated and appreciated. This has not been an easy time to be the church and yet much great work has been done. There are numerous examples of such significant work at MPPC from both the staff and session.

Still, the goal of all healthy organizations should be continuous learning about best practices for faithful service both in the present moment and in days to

come. This obviously includes churches, and as well applies to those chosen to lead them. Ruling and teaching elders have a special responsibility for continuous learning and for measuring their work against the standards presented in the scriptures and in the constitutional documents of the church. These leaders are likewise challenged to pay attention to their context and their culture and to discern what God may be doing in their location in any given moment.

And they are especially challenged to lead the church in faithfulness to God's mission in the world as identified in scripture. The work of the church is always God's work, not the people's work. Consequently, healthy spiritual leaders do not think of the church as "my church" but as God's Church. Even at those times when they use the expression "my church," they use it in the sense of participation and not ownership. Healthy leaders know themselves as those called not to claim their own power but to proclaim God's power. They are not called to protect their own authority but rather to proclaim the authority of the gospel. They likewise recognize that shared leadership means not always getting their own way. This allows them to support choices that may require changes to past practices but allows the larger community to move in a necessary direction.

This does not mean turning one's backs on the history and core values of one's community of faith. These are to be celebrated and used as foundations for all shared work. It does mean the recognition that the context for ministry for all churches has now changed and that new ways and forms for being the church may well be needed. There is far less social pressure to join a church in our current cultural context. Among those who do join, fewer and fewer people join churches because of the name on the front. They join because they want to be a part of an organization that is making a positive impact on God's world and that brings joy and purpose to their lives. Healthy leaders recognize this. They also understand that the practice of discernment of God's purposes is most likely to occur when there is openness to learning and growth. The question that all churches should be asking is how the God who has led us in the past may now be leading us into the future.

This report is written in support of such a perspective, with the hope that it can be helpful for the session as it looks to the future. It is designed to "prime the pump" for faithful and gracious conversations within the session and among the

leadership of the church. It is not intended to tell session what to do or how to shape its life together, for members of the session are the true experts when it comes to the life of their church. Neither is it intended to suggest that some people within the session are “good” and others “bad.” It is assumed that all of us are sinners saved by the grace of God in Christ and all want to be faithful to our call as we understand it.

Rather, it is share observations of where there have been successes in the past year and before and where areas for growth may remain. It is intended to provide food for thought that might lead to greater understanding of current church dynamics, and if it meets that goal, it will have fulfilled its basic purpose. If it goes one step further and leads to decisions that enhance the work of the staff and session, so much the better. And certainly, if there are parts that are ultimately not helpful, the session should feel free to ignore them and move on to something more useful.

## **History**

Pinnacle’s involvement with MPPC began with a phone conversation with The Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum in the late fall of 2019. The call came following a particularly difficult session meeting a month or so earlier where the decision was made to end the employment of Steve Day, a member of the church staff. In addition, there had reportedly been other contentious session meetings in the months prior to that decision. In response to this identified tension, the decision was made to seek outside support for addressing concerns both within the session and with some members of the staff, with a special focus on relationships between some members of the session and the head of staff.

The session approved a working relationship with Pinnacle Leadership Associates in January of 2020 and Dan Holloway was identified as the primary work partner. The decision was made to start the process with listening sessions that would involve one on one conversations between the consultant and all elders and staff members who were willing to speak. Thirty-seven such conversations were held. Due to the emerging Corona virus, these conversations

were held over Zoom, or in a couple of cases, by phone. Additional research was done through the reading of church history and through personal conversations with several previous MPPC staff members and leaders of Charleston-Atlantic Presbytery including the General Presbyter and members of the Committee on Ministry.

## **Observations**

The result of these multiple conversations was the identification of several primary issues that deserved attention. These issues were identified in some detail in my first report to the session in the spring of 2020 (please see that report for further information.) Some of these issues are currently being addressed. Regular coaching began with the head of staff and to a lesser degree with other members of the staff. A Pinnacle Team was formed by the session and has faithfully continued to shepherd the process recommended by the original report. The Way Forward Team was formed as a subgroup to address reported tensions within the session and in relationships of some elders with the senior pastor. Educational work has taken place in session meetings, in special learning opportunities, and in training sessions with the Pinnacle Team and Way Forward Team. Multiple informal coaching conversations have been held with individual members of the session and with members of the Pinnacle Team and the Way Forward Team about the best ways to resolve difficulties.

Several positive outcomes have resulted from these initiatives. Peter has been a full and active participant in our coaching time and has demonstrated a deep commitment to learning. The congregation's Pinnacle Team has provided excellent leadership and attention to detail and will continue to do so with future recommendations. The Way Forward Team spent many faithful hours both identifying and trying to address issues of difference. Numerous individuals not directly involved with these work groups have provided prayerful support and encouragement. The session by its vote has likewise approved full financial support for this work.

## **Opportunities for Growth**

While there have been several successes, opportunities for growth also remain. These are identified below as are potential ways of engaging them.

- (1) There is a significant need for an honest discussion about what it means to be an effective elder in the church. There clearly are different understandings of the work and responsibilities of elders among the ruling elders at MPPC. Some ruling elders understand their work to be more hands-on, with significant responsibility for ongoing operations and with regular oversight of staff and the work they do. Session meetings are a time to review the work of ministry teams and staff but also a time to reengage issues that are determined to need more work or refinement. Other elders see their role more in terms of visionary and general fiduciary leadership, with a desire to release to the staff and the elected Ministry Teams primary responsibility for most day-to-day decisions. Their service on session is focused more on identifying and supporting the overall mission of the church, with a general focus on direction and vision. These different perspectives are evident in session meetings and have led to confusion about purpose and effectiveness.

It is likely that these perspectives have been shaped by past church experiences for many of those currently serving on the session. Some ruling elders, for example, have spoken of being frustrated by past leadership that seemed to be dictatorial in style and substance. In response, some of these elders have spoken of the need to take back the church, to restore it to a more balanced perspective where the voices of ruling elders carry more weight than was previously allowed. While perhaps understandable in response to what was experienced as ineffective and controlling leadership, these efforts have, even if unintentionally, had a negative impact on both the current staff and the current session.

Members of the staff often feel that they are not trusted to act in a competent and professional manner. Their motivations, actions, and decisions are often second-guessed, leading to a sense of their choices never being good enough. It should be noted that some previous members of the staff described a similar experience. This is experienced by the current staff as a lack of trust and has led to adversarial relationships on several occasions.

And there is evidence that this has been ongoing for the last couple of years. About two months into his tenure, following a Staff Appreciation Luncheon, the pastor was called into a meeting with three members of the Personnel Committee. Dr. Bynum had been asked to write a letter to the congregation explaining the resignation of staff member Amy Thomas. Dr. Bynum expressed his concerns about this, both because it was a forced resignation rather than one that was voluntary, and because he had serious reservations about the wisdom of that action altogether. When he wrote a letter that was not deemed sufficiently supportive of the position taken by the Personnel Committee, he was told he was not acting as a team player when he raised such questions.

Other examples of a lack of trust include a review process of the pastor's performance relatively early in his tenure that was described by some ruling elders as slanted and designed to make the pastor look bad. A third example was a stewardship letter that was written without the pastor's knowledge or blessing in an apparent attempt to bypass his involvement. Likewise, the job description provided for Steve Day as the church administrator, where he was told he would report directly to the session rather than to the Head of Staff, also suggested a lack of trust in the pastor and put him into an untenable position. He found himself having to regain control of a position that should have been his from the beginning. While the session eventually approved a recommendation to end Mr. Days employment, it caused many hard feelings, some of which could well still exist. These examples suggest a pattern of mistrust of the pastor that has been present from his earliest days in office. Others on the staff have spoken of similar experiences.



(2) Conversely, some members of the session say that their input is often not welcomed and that their questions for clarification and understanding about the ongoing work of the church are not appreciated. They believe that staff has misread their intentions in asking such questions, which they see as evidence of faithful church leadership. While the way in which questions are asked can sometimes affect the way they are heard, it is nevertheless acknowledged that ruling elders need to ask questions that honestly seek to strengthen the ministry of the church, and good and helpful questions should be fully welcomed and encouraged.

(3) All of this suggests a need for ongoing attention to the work and responsibilities of members of the session. There is likewise a need for additional clarity about the work of staff and how they are to relate to members of the session. Continuing education events for elders that would allow for a more relaxed consideration of this issue may be appropriate. When the time is right, a session retreat focused on effective board leadership for larger churches may be an especially good context for engaging such questions. Both staff and ruling elders need to be empowered and freed for effective work. The session will operate more joyously with a shared understanding both of its shared responsibilities and primary work.

(4) There is a need for more attention to church size theory and the ways that church size impacts the operation of the church. Large churches have different leadership needs and most often operate in different ways than do smaller congregations. MPPC is clearly a large church with over 2500 members, yet it sometimes seems to operate as more of a mid-sized church in terms of session participation, structure, and agenda. This is reflected in the relatively small number of people who seem to be involved in leadership for a church of this size. It is also reflected in the expectations of staff and the items found on a typical session agenda. This is common among churches that have experienced rapid growth as sessions are often running hard just to keep up with the demand. Agendas tend to remain as

they have been for many years. Yet some time set aside to consider the impact of church size may prove helpful to the long-term work of the church.

(5) Conversations over the last year suggest that there is a great hunger among many members of the session not just to do the business of the church (fulfilling its important fiduciary responsibilities), but also to move towards more spiritual discernment of God's claim on the church. To say this in other language, they want to engage in visionary work and generative work in addition to fiduciary work. Visionary work is defined as determining both the direction of the church and major steps that must be taken to make it possible. Generative work is paying attention to the things that are happening in the culture and the ways this impacts the work of the church. It is to engage in discernment on a regular basis of the new things God may be doing and to trust the work of the Spirit to guide the church to God's purposes even in a world that is changing. The session will want to continually find ways to attend to all three of these functions (fiduciary, visionary, and generative) and to identify elders for future service who have gifts in each of these areas. It will also want to make sure these are regularly addressed on the session agenda.

(6) Communication remains an important area for growth as ineffective and inappropriate communication continues to take place in several ways. There is evidence of back-door conversations and private meetings or email chats that suggest an attempt by some to control the direction of the church outside of normal decision-making circles. One example of this was an email that was unintentionally circulated by a church leader criticizing the pastor's motivations regarding possible plans for cameras in the sanctuary. Gatherings of like-minded persons either in person or by email may also have had the effect, even if unintended, of creating an "us" vs. "them" mentality. Such meetings and off the record communications has led not only to a sense of pain among those inappropriately criticized but also to a sense of exclusion among those elders who are not a part of these

background conversations. It is important to move such conversations back to the full session.

(7) As the consultant, I have also received individual phone calls or email communications from four members of the current session and one former elder as well as from a couple of others in the church voicing concerns about the leadership of the senior pastor and suggesting that his work product is unsatisfactory. All calls were consistent in questioning the effectiveness of his leadership. It was these phone calls that led to the formation of the Way Forward Team, an effort to get a representative group of the elders, representing a variety of perspectives, to talk directly to one another rather than individually to the consultant. I asked both those who had expressed concern about Dr. Bynum's leadership and those who had expressed support for his leadership to suggest names for this Way Forward Group to assure some balance in perspectives. While not all those who were asked to serve agreed to do so, those efforts at balance were successful to the degree that there was significant representation on this team from both sides based on the names that were given to me. Those who agreed to serve on the Way Forward Team were Tom Dozier, Eliza Dunn, Evie Evans, Wade Thompson, Coby Mazingo, James Scott, Kimbo Richardson, Paula Custer, and Lindsay Bruorton.

Because there have been several questions asked about the work of the Way Forward Team, this report includes additional detail about the work of that team. I announced in the first meeting that this group had been formed partly in response to criticism of the pastor from a few of the elders and in part in response to ongoing dysfunction in the meetings of the session. I further shared that we were there both to understand those who had expressed concern about the pastor's leadership and the concerns of those who felt that Peter had been mistreated and made a scapegoat for other issues. We were similarly formed to determine a way forward that would allow the session to return to a place of greater health and more productive functioning. All participants were asked in early meetings to share both their hopes for this process as well as the concerns that led them to join this group. It was also noted that the sharing of such concerns

was likely to lead to difficult and painful conversations but hopefully would become a way both to surface concerns and to find a way forward that all could support.

In early conversations, concerns were mostly shared in a clear but restrained manner. Those who had concerns about the pastor's leadership spoke to failure in the arena of pastoral care and to his being defensive when approached with suggestions for change. They also acknowledged that they struggled with trusting him based on personal interactions.

Among the issues noted by those who self-identified as supporters of the pastor's leadership were concerns over early and constant pressure from some members of session to conform to expectations of what he should be and do. Examples of this have already been given. There was likewise the sense that this pressure continued through private conversations and sometimes through innuendo. Conversations around these divergent perspectives continued for three months. While there was some evidence of progress in early meetings which led to the desire for additional conversations and the continuation of the committee's work, things eventually become more intense and painful. Some initial attempts were made to identify points of agreement around next steps, but significantly different perspectives on core items in our discussion made progress on agreement difficult at best.

Over the next several weeks, Evie, Wade, and Coby made the decision not to continue their work with this group, citing a loss of confidence in the process as well as concerns about the consultant's leadership. It should be noted that Wade and Coby had previously met with Peter midway through the Way Forward process attempting to clear the air with him, an effort that I supported and for which all three deserve credit. Yet eventually, the three who withdrew felt they should no longer participate with the Way Forward group. While disappointing to the rest of the group, the remaining members committed to continuing the work for at least one more meeting.

Since the pastor had been the subject of so much of the group's conversation to that point, it was deemed important to hear from Dr. Bynum himself. He met with the remaining six members of the team plus the consultant and shared his story. While celebrating several positive things, he also spoke to criticism that he has experienced since his earliest days at the church and that he continues to experience. The committee was touched by his presentation and expressed appreciation for his honest sharing.

After much conversation, the committee ultimately tasked the consultant with the responsibility of writing a final report that would provide an overview of this year's work with a special emphasis on the work of the Way Forward Team. As suggested above, the Way Forward process effort met with limited success. Nevertheless, it is a reminder of the potential value of conversations shared in an atmosphere of trust and hope. Going forward there is still a need for conversations within the session about concerns and differences. The Pinnacle Team will be bringing action items for the session's consideration that can provide good structure for such conversations.

The truth is that any pastor has room for growth as does any ruling elder. Dr. Bynum has willingly participated in coaching and has been open about his desire to grow continually in his work as the Head of Staff. Nevertheless, the perspective of this report is that the pastor's leadership is not the crucial issue in this time of difficulty. Indeed, as one who has watched and worked with many pastors over the years, Peter's work performance is not only satisfactory but goes far beyond that. He has provided outstanding leadership during an unusually difficult time and has remained faithful to his call through it all. He is one of the more gifted pastors I have met and brings tremendous commitment and dedication to the work of ministry. I find him to be a true asset to the work of the church and one whose ministry should rightly be celebrated.

The most significant issue yet to be addressed centers around the role and responsibilities of the session and how church leaders can most effectively

contribute their gifts to God's mission for the church. This includes all ruling and teaching elders for only a shared approach to learning can bring success.

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- (8) Reconciliation remains an important need for members of the session. While people need not always agree, there does need to be a renewed commitment to both graciousness and truthfulness. There are too many angry remarks in session meetings and too much criticism of others in the room for healthy functioning to occur. This can be helped by structures that support collegiality and civility but ultimately will also require individual initiatives towards reconciliation. This will undoubtedly be difficult work. Nevertheless, reconciliation is a core spiritual practice for Christian people. Likewise, the work of the session will be strengthened both by accountability for personal actions and forgiveness when failures are acknowledged. This will in turn set the context for true reconciliation.

## **Concluding Comments**

While the scriptures invite the church to model God's gift of unity, they also recognize the reality of disagreement within the family of faith. Congregations have always lived with varying levels of tension and, like many others, that has sometimes been true of the session at MPPC in recent years. This is not meant as an indictment of the church or of the session but rather as an invitation to find new ways of being in relationship with one another. The question is not whether disagreements should be expected in the church going forward, but whether there is a commitment in place to negotiate those differences in ways that reflect the spirit and graciousness of Jesus Christ. It will remain a primary goal for church leaders in the months and years to come both to acknowledge this and establish expectations for how the session will operate and how elders will relate to one another.

No church will ever make all its members happy, and at the end of the day, that is not the right goal for the church anyway. The goal is to form disciples in the way and spirit of Jesus Christ and to support and encourage members of the church in their individual and shared ministries. It is to teach and demonstrate love of God and love of neighbor and that remains a basic job description for every church and every leadership team. My hope is that the session will keep that at the forefront of its common ministry.

While this report has been straightforward in its observations, it is only because there is so much to celebrate and to build upon at MPPC. My hope is that this report will be an invitation to a conversation about God's call to your church at this time in its history, and a tool to be used for considering the best ways to achieve that goal. Please know that you will be in my prayers as you continue that work and that I remain grateful for the privilege of being your partner during this journey.

In Christ's Service,

Dan Holloway

Pinnacle Leadership Associates