

Final Report of the Administrative Commission For Perry Valley Presbyterian Church

Background to the appointment: Appointment of the four-member Administrative Commission for the Perry Valley Presbyterian Church was made by the Commission on Ministry at its April 2, 2020, meeting, and thereafter ratified by Presbytery at its next meeting. The appointment was preceded by several meetings between Interim Presbytery Executive Cheryl Galan and the Session of the Perry Valley Church ("PVPC or Church") as well as a general congregational meeting. Our Administrative Commission (abbreviated hereafter as "A-C") had an orientation meeting with Cheryl Galan and Jim Speedy on April 21st to receive background information about the circumstances of the Church.

In recent years, the Church has been a part of the Juniata Valley Shared Ministry, formed by agreement among PVPC, Highland United, and Westminster churches, under the leadership of Rev. Nancy McClure. (Highland United was earlier formed in a merger between the Millerstown and Newport Presbyterian Churches, a union which PVPC declined to join at the time). As reported by PVPC leaders, the active membership of the congregation numbered in the "teens," although membership rolls may have listed about 40. Most of the time and energy of those active members was spent – apart from weekly worship services – in fund-raising activities to support the modest church budget. The congregation was responsible for about ¼ of the pastoral support in the Juniata Valley Shared Ministry, and, with the other costs of maintaining the facility (which were reduced to minimal levels), the active members (who were also filling most of the leadership positions in the church) felt worn out. As with many congregations, the age demographic is tilted heavily toward seniority as well, and the prospects for meaningful improvement seemed remote, despite the efforts of active members to leverage the many fundraising events for community and spiritual outreach. Those remaining members felt both loyalty and responsibility to the Church which has had a presence in the valley for well over 100 years. Cheryl Galan's meetings with the leadership group indicated a willingness to look at a decision to close the Church, with some fairly clear expression of interest in a combination with the Highland United congregation. The A-C's appointment followed promptly.

Orientation and Exploration: Our second meeting, on April 23rd, was a candid session¹ with Pastor Nancy McClure, giving us much history of the Church and the circumstances in which it found itself, as well as her assessment of the opportunities for a successful integration of the PVPC members into HUPC. Although PVPC had declined to join with the merger which had created Highland when it was first formed, recent years had seen cooperative projects between these two congregations and a growing sense of collegiality based on those experiences. Also, HUPC had loaned funds to PVPC to assist with a shortfall in its income, and PVPC was slowly repaying that loan, but its financial forecast for the year was not good. She confirmed the information reported to us through Cheryl Galan about the growing realization that the Church needed to confront the proposition that the burdens of carrying on

¹ Constrained by covid lockdown protocols, our A-C meetings were largely via Zoom, although we did meet in person in June and July, in the outdoor pavilion adjacent to the Church, and in the sanctuary in a congregational meeting on October 4th.

as a separately functioning congregation couldn't be sustained by its members. The initiative to begin a process to directly discuss how to proceed came from the church leadership and not the pastor. The Session had met with Cheryl Galan and then held two meetings with the congregation to talk about the future, after which the Session voted to request formation of an A-C to help them explore a "legacy path."

We learned also that the cemetery located next door to the Church property is owned by a separate cemetery association, though it has a long affiliation with the Church.² The cemetery association used a driveway across the Church property as one point of access, and members of the Church wanted to be sure to preserve that access way for the future.

We were advised that some quiet discussions were underway with leaders of the other churches in the Shared Ministry about the prospects for closure, understanding that if PVPC were to cease its operations, the burden of the pastor's compensation would have to be borne entirely by the two remaining congregations.

Planning next steps: We met with the Session and Deacons on May 25th and had a heartfelt discussion about the current circumstances in which PVPC leaders found themselves. The concept of closing the building and moving the membership to Highland has been discussed and seemed like the best alternative, although that step would be taken with real regret, given the many years that the Church had served as a community-based place of worship, fellowship, and service. As a next step we proposed to prepare a document outlining the steps which could be followed to facilitate the closing of the Church..

A draft "Congregational Plan for Honoring Our Past, Addressing the Present, and Caring For Our Future" was prepared by the A-C, reviewed with Pastor McClure and then circulated for discussion with the Session and Deacons in advance of a meeting in person with the Session and Deacons.³ We met with those persons on June 20th, at the Church pavilion. After a lengthy and heartfelt review of Church history, both past accomplishments and challenges, we turned to a candid discussion of the current circumstances. The meeting concluded with a decision that the Plan should be shared with the remainder of the congregation. The draft Plan document was sent to members of the congregation and a meeting was held on Sunday, July 12th, for purposes of discussion only.

² Members of the Wright family had been involved from the earliest days in the formation of a school building, then a meeting house, and finally an outpost mission church of the Millerstown Presbyterian Church in 1890. Various Wright family descendants remained very active in the church's life – leading to the identification of the church (pre-1958) as "Wright's Presbyterian Church." Adjacent to the Church building (as relocated in 1976) is situated the "Wrights' Presbyterian Church Cemetery." That cemetery is owned and maintained by an independent entity of the same name, and is an active cemetery. The Church sought to separate itself from the identity of the Millerstown church in 1958, and, with the blessing of the Presbytery, became "The Perry Valley Presbyterian Church," dropping the Wright name. The Wright's Presbyterian Church Cemetery retains its name and is managed by a separate board of trustees.

³ The Church has a unicameral form of governance.

Reaching consensus: Fourteen members of the congregation attended the July 12th meeting. As with our previous meeting, members recounted the rich history of their congregation. The conversation also focused on the prospect of joining with members at Highland, noting that a number of joint activities had already been pursued successfully. The prospect of being part of an active and vibrant church is appealing. Discussion then turned to the Church property and its disposition. A strong consensus view was expressed that the Church should not only protect the Cemetery Association's right of way across the Church property, but also look at conveying a strip of Church land – along the common border – to permit expansion of the still-active Cemetery in the future. The possibility of having Highland take over responsibility for the building was also raised as a possibility. Although marked by nostalgia and some sadness over the prospect of closing the Church, the consensus was clearly to move forward with the Plan.

The A-C next met with the Sessions of both Highland and Westminster, to alert them more formally with the decision path on which Perry Valley was embarked. The obvious implication for both was financial – the need to assume PVPC's share of the pastoral support – with a corollary benefit that Pastor Nancy would have only two churches (and two Sunday services) in her ministry portfolio. Both Sessions were understanding and gracious in acknowledging the circumstances and quickly agreed that for the coming year (2021) they would share the cost equally and then re-evaluate the matter going forward.

Formal action: Perry Valley's Session called a formal congregational meeting on Sunday October 4, 2020, a meeting held in person, attended by 11 persons and the Commission. At the meeting the members resolved to close the Church at the end of the year 2020, with the last worship service to be held December 27, 2021. Members of the A-C participated in that final service, which celebrated the history of the Church and the opportunity for new ministry moving forward, with God's grace. Formal dissolution of the Church would be deferred until the property has been disposed of. The resolutions included the specific designation that we seek a subdivision of land so a strip of Church land could be conveyed to the Cemetery Association, and that the right of way across the property be confirmed. The property was then to be sold.

Church finances: With respect to the Church's financial condition, we received a detailed income and expense statement from the Church treasurer. The Church had no financial assets other than its modest checking account balance, but no obligations other than the balance remaining due on its loan from Highland. The total budget of the Church for the preceding year had been about \$31,000, more than half of which was spent on pastoral support. The Church was able to pay its other operating expenses in 2020, but, from August 2020 through the end of the year, the Presbytery covered the PVPC share of pastoral support.

Original jurisdiction: On January 22, 2021, the Administrative Commission assumed original jurisdiction over the affairs of the Church. That action was taken at the request of the remaining Session members, who wished to be relieved of further responsibility for disposition of the Church property and issues related thereto, including action to dissolve the Church. We were advised that Highland United was not interested in taking on responsibility for the Perry Valley property.

In the two months following the final worship service, Highland and Westminster church representatives evaluated the PVPC physical resources (equipment, furniture and miscellaneous items), chose things that would be useful to them, and then organized work parties to move those items to their respective church facilities. We then met with the Township Planning Commission to pursue the project of transferring a strip of land to the Cemetery Association. However, those efforts were ultimately unavailing because the Church lot was exactly two acres in size, and the Township's ordinances requires a minimum two-acre lot size – we did not have surplus land to transfer. We recruited a knowledgeable local broker to list the property for sale to the public, and, just before the listing was to go “live” a benefactor emerged who supported the idea of having the Cemetery Association take over the Church property. With the assent of the Presbytery's Administration Committee, and after brief negotiations and approval by the Cemetery Association's board,⁴ we reached an agreement to transfer the property, “as-is” to the Association for an agreed price of \$25,000.

Property sale: Closing on the sale of the Church property was held on June 22, 2021, and a deed signed by the Chair of the Administrative Commission acting on behalf of both Perry Valley Presbyterian Church and the Presbytery of Carlisle. The net proceeds of that sale were delivered to the Presbytery. Following the transfer of the property and payment of the few remaining expenses related to maintaining the building, the modest residual balance in the PVPC checking account was authorized to be sent to Highland church to be applied against the remaining balance of the loan of several years ago.

Presbytery financial support: The Presbytery's Administration Committee (Mary Speedy, Chair) provided financial support as needed to enable this work to proceed to conclusion. As summarized on the Financial Summary, we have repaid the funds which were advanced, and have a modest surplus as well. The expenses and receipts of the work of the A-C are shown on the attached financial report. We request and recommend that \$3,000.00 of the residual balance be distributed to Highland United.

Fourteen members of the Perry Valley Presbyterian Church (and almost all of its active participants) have transferred their membership to Highland United, and, thus, we have a de facto merger of the two congregations. We believe that the consolidation with members of Perry Valley Church will serve the Highland Church well. It is aptly named the “Highland United Presbyterian Church.”

The final action of this Administrative Commission is to declare that the Perry Valley Presbyterian Church is dissolved, effective upon the approval and acceptance of this Final Report by Presbytery.

Members of the Administrative Commission:

Donna Wenger, Elder
Marel King, Elder
Rev. Graham Fowler, Pastor of Word and Sacrament
David Lehman, Elder and Chair

⁴ The Cemetery Association's board is headed by a descendant of the Wright family He is primarily interested in preserving the property and keeping it as a community resource to the extent possible, but in all events, to be able to protect the ongoing work of the Association..

Financial Summary
Final Report of the Administrative Commission
For Perry Valley Presbyterian Church
November 19, 2021

Expenses Paid by the Presbytery

PVPC share of Pastor's compensation (5 months)	9,202
Insurance coverage for vacant church	5,322
Legal services (property sale)	900
Locksmith	352
Building exterior stabilization	1,490
Real Estate commission expense	<u>2,075</u>
Total:	19,341

Revenue Received by the Presbytery

Property sale net proceeds	22,750
Insurance premium refund	<u>3,234</u>
Total:	25,984

Residual Balance 6,643