

***A Report to the Congregation of Southport Presbyterian Church and to the  
Committee on Ministry of the Presbytery of Whitewater Valley based on  
Listening Sessions with the Presbytery of Whitewater Valley***

The Presbytery of Whitewater Valley, through its Committee on Ministry, wishes to acknowledge the recent partnership effort of the Listening Sessions with Southport Presbyterian Church. 431 individuals participated in the listening group sessions and these participants represented a wide range of membership tenure. A thorough review of a representative sample showed that 22% of participants had been members for less than 10 yrs while another 22% had been members for more than 40 yrs, with a mean membership tenure of 24 yrs and a median tenure of 21.5 years. All of these values suggest that a diverse sample of the membership participated. The Presbytery task force and the SPC Session agreed that the listening group information would be reviewed by a team of 3 members of the Presbytery and 3 members of SPC; the following information is submitted as the summary of that review. Similarly, a group of 13 SPC staff members, each a non-clergy Ministry Director, were interviewed and allowed to answer similar questions under the guidance of Alan Thames, Executive Presbyter with an SPC Elder in attendance. The information acquired from that process is also noted.

**Through the answers provided to Question 1 of the listening group sessions (“How has the congregation of Southport Presbyterian Church faithfully served the people of God?”), the committee wishes to note and celebrate a representative sample of the ways that the congregation of Southport Presbyterian Church has faithfully served the people of God:**

- By ministering to **Children and Youth** through Sunday School, JAM (Jr. High) and High School youth groups, and Young Adult Ministries, through VBS both here and in partnership for 20+ years with Morris Fork, KY, through outreach ministries such as the extensive Sports Ministry and the Welcome Place (our Christian children’s day care) and Parent’s Day Out ministries, through cooking camp and youth and children’s choirs, through summer camps, and through youth and young adult targeted Mission Trips and Mission opportunities. There is also an on-site Christian School serving children from 2 yrs old through 8<sup>th</sup> grade.
- By ministering to **Adults and Seniors** through Adult Education classes, a vibrant Seniors Ministry that includes trips, DUOS (Do Unto Others), 300 Club, Nursing Home visitation, a communion team to shut-ins, and an Adult Day Care, and through prayer support which is offered both individually and communally. Many Bible Study groups and small groups meet throughout the week as well as the Sunday morning offerings.
- Southport Presbyterian Church has a strong **Missions focus** as evidenced by many mission trips, supported missionaries, and missions weekends that both adults and youth support.
- **Reaching out to the needs of the community** is a priority and this occurs through the Outreach Ministries of Sports, Food Services, and Welcome Place as well as Adult Day Care, Counseling Services, and Missions. The Great Banquet and its teenage equivalent, The Awakening, are also outreach ministries housed by SPC but involving us in the larger community. SPC also supports The Refuge and Wheeler Mission, serves meals to the homeless at Roberts Park and to displaced families at the Ronald McDonald House, and provides gloves (Jesus Gloves You) to the homeless each winter through the youth.

- SPC provides facilities, prayer support, financial support, and material aid to a large **community of Burmese refugee Christians**, the Chin population. This group uses the Southview campus of SPC throughout the week for worship, community activities, teaching in English language and life skills.
- **Pastoral Care** is an emphasis of this congregation with visitation ministries to nursing homes and hospitals, Stephen Ministers, Counseling services, support groups for infertility, breast cancer, depression and anxiety, grief support and others. There are also Marriage Ministry offerings, premarital counseling, and financial education classes.
- The **Fine Arts** Ministry offers unique opportunities for creative expression as worship through vocal and instrumental music, dance, and theater (through Center Stage Productions).
- The **strong pastoral staff** emphasizes sound, Biblical-based preaching and teaching. This congregation celebrates a history of producing many pastors and missionaries and of supporting them through their training, both formally and informally.
- Multiple **worship services** are offered to include more people and varied styles of worship. These include 2 traditional services and a contemporary service each Sunday morning, a Saturday evening service, and a Sunday night contemplative prayer service.

It is clear that the congregation of Southport Presbyterian Church is very engaged in ministry and in mission. The congregation celebrates the many ways it engages both the local community and the world for Christ. The offerings of this congregation are diverse, extensive, and may well be unknown to many in the Presbytery. Understanding who this church is and the far-reaching influence of its ministries should be a priority to all who will take part in making decisions about its future.

**Through Question 2, note can be made that the congregation has some awareness of the functions of the presbytery but this awareness may be limited. The following represent the most common answers given when the congregation of Southport Presbyterian Church was asked “How has the Presbytery of Whitewater Valley faithfully served the people of God?” The five most common answers were:**

- By Identifying and providing for **pastors** for PCUSA churches as well as providing ongoing support through benefits, structure, fellowship, and education
- Through **Missions** organizations and opportunities both locally and internationally
- Through Camp **PYOCA**
- By **assisting congregations** during times of difficulty such as providing mediation, support in times of internal conflict, and helping to enforce conduct standards when necessary for pastors (a past issue regarding sexual misconduct was mentioned)
- One of the five most common answers was “**I don’t know**”.
- Less common answers included: Presbyterian Women’s organization, help to smaller churches in need, and educational resources.

**Question 3 asked the listening session participants to describe how Southport Presbyterian Church might be different if it were no longer part of Whitewater Valley Presbytery. Again, the five most common responses are recorded below:**

- The largest percentage felt that the congregation itself **would not change**.
- Just slightly less common was the answer that, apart from PCUSA, Southport Presbyterian Church would “**suffer from fewer distractions**”. Comments suggested that there is a dilution of resources (especially time and energy) that will be removed if the Session and staff no longer have to be reacting and responding after every General Assembly.
- Next was a sense that the congregation could remain more firmly and clearly **grounded in Scripture** if it were outside the PCUSA.
- **Financial losses** to the church were cited. These include uncertainties relating to the future of its property, the possibilities of legal expenses, and the loss of membership and giving that have already occurred as a reaction to the denomination or may occur as the process continues without final resolution.
- Finally, **losses of non-financial resources** were listed. This would include the loss of colleagues and already established relationships, the uncertainty of the future choices of the pastoral staff (which are being deferred until the congregation’s dispensation is clear), and the missional and support structures of the connectional system that Southport Presbyterian Church has been an active participant in.

**Question 4 asked the converse but similar question, “How will Whitewater Valley Presbytery be different if Southport Presbyterian Church is no longer part of it?” The 5 most common answers were as follows:**

- The Presbytery will **lose valuable resources, both financial and non-financial**. This included comments about the loss of the per capita contributions, the absence of our membership on committees and in missions-related posts, and the absence of future pastors, leaders, and missionaries from this congregation.
- Second, the Presbytery will **lose a strong conservative voice**. Even when this is not the dominant voice, its presence has still had influence and it will be diminished by the departure of this large church.
- Third, respondents felt that the Presbytery will **lose a vibrant, Spirit-led congregation**. Whether in agreement or not, many expressed awareness that Southport Presbyterian Church does have influence and value to the overall health and diversity of the Presbytery and will be missed.
- The fourth and fifth most common answers disagree with the above. Fourth was “**we are unsure our departure will have any effect**” and fifth was, “Our departure will have **no effect**.” Included in this group were those who feel that the more conservative viewpoints are no longer welcome or respected. (Note is made that, the total of these two answers was only 63 people while the total of each of the first two answers was individually larger than both of these combined – 136 and 97, respectively.)

**Question 5 asked the participants to answer the question “What reformed denomination do you believe most faithfully represents the views of your congregation?”**

56% of the respondents answered that the Evangelical Presbyterian Church seems to represent the beliefs of the congregation best while 36% either answered that they were unsure, had not yet decided, or did not answer at all. (Note is made that at the time the listening sessions started, the Session had not presented educational or instructional material about other denominations to the congregation.)

**“Question 6”**

At the bottom of the listening session form there was an un-numbered question that read as follows: “Do you personally wish to be dismissed from the PCUSA and if so, to what reformed body?” By some responses it was clear that the wording created some confusion. Some said they understood the “personal” to mean “to leave the congregation alone now”, which it clearly did not intend. Note is also made that as the other questions were numbered and this one was not, some did not notice it or answer it. (This was reported by several individuals who said they would have answered it if they’d seen it.) Also it has been anecdotally reported that the instructions were confusing – the form says “this question will not be discussed” which some interpreted as meaning they were not supposed to answer it. Despite any confusion relating to this question, the following represent the answers that **were** given: The total number of forms turned in was 431. Of this total, 320 participants said “yes”, they wish to be dismissed, 14 said “no”, they wish to remain in PCUSA, and 97 fall into the category of uncertain (either unmarked, wrote “don’t know” or “haven’t yet decided”, or wrote something which was unclear).

**Presentation of Listening Session Data:**

Based on 431 participants, **74% express a desire to be dismissed,**  
**3% express a desire to remain in PCUSA,**  
**23% express no clear desire as of the end of July.**

The number of participants who answered the question with a yes or no at this time was 334. So 334 of 431 participants said yes or no, this is **77% of the total sample**, of those, **96% answered yes, (in favor of dismissal) 4% answered no, (in favor of remaining in PC(USA))**

**Ministry Directors Session**

Also as part of our listening session review, a list of questions was given to 13 non-clergy ministry directors who subsequent to filling out this questionnaire engaged in a discussion – similar to the listening sessions – with a representative of the presbytery (Alan Thames). And, also similar to the listening sessions, an elder from SPC was present to take notes based on the conversation. Those forms and minutes were subsequently reviewed and the following summary points are offered:

Ministries represented included Fine Arts, Adult Day Center, Children’s, Junior High, Senior High, and Young Adults, Sports and Recreation, Food Services, and the Welcome Place Childcare Center. Also represented were the Business Administrator, Finance Director, Information Technologies, and Communications directors.

- Of the 13 director level staff present, there was **100% support** of the Session’s recommendation to leave the PCUSA.

- Of the directors, **about ½ are SPC members** while the other ½ are not.
- When asked questions about division, there is an overwhelming sense that these directors **do not consider division likely** but **perceive broad-based support** and cohesiveness among the congregation.
- As to modifications, adjustments, or resource issues that may result from “a divided congregation”, most reiterate that they don’t think division is a likely result. But, if it does occur, they voice **a trust that God will guide, provide and direct**. They acknowledge that an adjustment phase and a period of financial challenge may come, but they expect that to be short. Many voiced that **to NOT leave when this is a question of core values would be much more damaging than to risk an uncertain future outside of PCUSA**.
- Those relying most heavily on **facilities** – Food Services Ministry, Sports, and the Welcome Place Childcare – acknowledge that the loss of buildings might well be the end of their ministries, and **yet they still voiced support of the decision to leave**.
- Directors acknowledge excitement at the prospect of **removing the distraction** that responding to so many denominational changes has forced on the staff, pastors, and Session and “instead to see all that energy instead channeled into discipleship” will be a welcome change.
- Directors also acknowledge a genuine **loss to the community if facilities are withheld**.

## Summary Statements:

### Process

Per the request and at the direction of the Whitewater Valley Presbytery Response Team for Southport Presbyterian Church (Rev. Alan Thames, Executive Presbyter, Mr. Gary Shaw, Interim Stated Clerk,, Mr. “Hitch” Learned, Moderator, Ms. Sandra Reid, Moderator of Coordinating Council, and Ms. Martha McDonald, Moderator, Committee on Ministry) a team was assembled including two initial representatives of Whitewater Valley Presbytery (Rev. Alan Thames and Rev. Bob Heimach) and two representatives of Southport Presbyterian Church Session (Dr. Maureen Watson and Mr. David Lantz). These four individuals were to select two other mutually agreed upon representatives which was promptly accomplished – Rev. Barbara Sloop and Dr. Ann Hunt were added to complete our review committee.

This committee developed a plan for evaluating the more than 400 forms that were collected from the participants of the many listening sessions that were held through June and July at Southport Presbyterian Church. Each participant was to fill out a questionnaire (attached at back). A discussion was then facilitated by one or more representatives of the Whitewater Valley Presbytery. An elder of Southport Presbyterian Church was present at each session to take minutes of the discussion. After approximately one hour, the session was brought to a close with prayer, then the questionnaires and minutes were placed together in a sealed envelope and taken to the Presbytery office. They remained there until the time came for this committee to review them, which would not occur until all sessions were finished.

The committee agreed upon the following as the most desirable method for evaluation: three “teams” were made, each team containing one representative of Presbytery and one representative of SPC. The teams consisted of Alan Thames working with Ann Hunt, Bob Heimach working with Maureen Watson, and Barbara Sloop working with David Lantz. The packets were then broken into equal groups of three and each team underwent the process of reviewing that portion of the total. It was felt that this way each party was represented in the evaluation of each packet. Similar “headings” for review of the questions were agreed upon and each group reported its findings. Those 3 reports were then combined and the major headings and findings are reported here for both parties, and by both parties, in concert.

The committee would like to report to both Southport Presbyterian Church and to the Presbytery through the Committee on Ministry that the process of this committee has been, throughout, collegial, mutually respectful, and bathed with prayer. It is our profound hope that both parties will faithfully continue to respect each other, to pray for each other, and to treat each other with kindness and forbearance, by the witness of Matthew 18 and in the example of Jesus Christ.

### **Summary Statements:**

#### **Impressions**

- There is no evidence of significant division amongst this congregation or the non-clergy staff members serving it.
- There seems to be a high degree of confidence in the Session – certainly we found no evidence that the active Elders are out of sync with the general mood of the congregation.
- The conflict seems framed, for this congregation, as one of core values – specifically, the authority of Scripture and the Lordship of Jesus Christ.
- The members of this committee representing Southport Presbyterian Church wish to state that we believe that the discernment process of the representatives of Whitewater Valley Presbytery with respect to our future relationship with PCUSA, as evidenced by this time and process of discernment, has been thorough, careful, and prayerful and, to date, they have abided by the standards of the *Guidelines for Discernment* as published by our Presbytery in 2007.
- The members of this committee representing the Presbytery wish to state that we believe that the discernment process of this congregation and its Session with respect to its future relationship with PCUSA, as evidenced by this time and process of mutual discernment, has been thorough, careful, and prayerful and, to date, they have abided by the standards of the *Guidelines for Discernment* as published by our Presbytery in 2007.

### **Summary Statements:**

#### **Recommendations**

- Just as it is important for the members of the Presbytery to have a fuller understanding of the breadth of ministry and mission of Southport Presbyterian Church as we attempt to honor the future and call of

that congregation, so is it worthwhile that the Presbytery have ample opportunity to provide a fuller vision of its ministry and mission before final dispositions and decisions are made.

Therefore, three congregational forums have been scheduled at Southport Presbyterian Church as venues for the Presbytery to present its ministry and mission in any way it so chooses. These will occur on Wednesday, October 14 at 7:00 p.m.; on Sunday, October 18 at 3:00p.m.; and on Tuesday, October 27 at 7:00 p.m.

- This committee recommends that the Committee on Ministry (and the Coordinating Council) agree to allow a congregational vote to occur during the weekend worship services at Southport Presbyterian Church on November 14/15. (A full description of the process of said vote will follow shortly)
- As is stated in the Whitewater Valley Presbytery's *Guidelines for Discernment 2007* document: "If the Presbytery and the congregation together conclude that a substantial majority of the congregation are determined to separate from the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Presbytery shall commit itself to a faithful and equitable process through which the congregation may be dismissed to another denomination."
- We strongly encourage that both sides continue to honor their commitment to mutual blessing, respectful dialogue, and the highest standards of ethical and moral behavior throughout this process.