

Report from the Synod of the Northeast's Mediation Network Team

September 24, 2020

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

This report is a summation of the work that has been done on your behalf through the auspices of the Mediation Network of the Synod of the Northeast.

This Summer of 2020 your moderator, Ruling Elder David Dorer, and your Council asked for a mediation team from the Synod to help them work through some difficulties that arose in the Spring and early Summer between the Moderator and the Council regarding appropriate responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Council asked the Rev. Jane Wilson, the Rev. Katie Cole, and the Rev. SuYoung Kim to represent them in these meetings.

The Rev. Leah Ntuala from the Presbytery of Geneva and the Rev. David Young from Newton Presbytery formed the team that worked with your leaders.

This is a brief review of events from May 2020 to the present:

Last May, the Governor of Massachusetts issued guidelines for houses of worship to re-open. In response to this perceived "green light" the Resource Presbyter, the Rev. Cindy Kohlmann and Stated Clerk, the Rev. T.J. DeMarco, sent a letter on May 18 to pastors and churches in Boston and Northern New England presbyteries "strongly recommending that you refrain from returning to the building for worship."

The letter from Cindy and T.J. offered steps to take before re-opening and also announced several webinars on May 19 and 20 to share "Theological, Ecclesiastical and Practical Considerations" regarding returning indoor worship and building use. An overwhelming majority of the churches of these presbyteries attended these webinars.

Your council met on May 21. During this meeting your Moderator, David Dorer, submitted a pastoral letter he had written. He recommended it be sent out to all the churches to reiterate his concern over re-opening for indoor worship, based on his professional experience in epidemiology, the guidance of many physicians and scientists, and his great concern for the health of congregants, should indoor worship occur. It was his opinion that the letter sent out by Cindy and T.J. was not forceful enough in asking churches to remain closed to indoor worship. He also felt that the webinars did not make a clear and forceful enough case against re-opening.

The Council disagreed and felt that the urgency of the situation and the seriousness of remaining closed to indoor worship had been adequately addressed and decided not to send the Moderator's letter. The Moderator was the lone dissenting voice in this vote.

The Moderator called for a special meeting of the Council for May 27 to reconsider sending his letter. Accompanying the call for the meeting was a letter from the Moderator which contained the language, "I have no choice but to tell you that, if the letter does not go out, I will need to resign."

At this Council meeting the majority once again decided not to send out the Moderator's letter. The corrected minutes of the meeting reflect that "the Council received the resignation of the moderator."

There has been some controversy over whether the Moderator's letter in which he stated his need to resign was, in fact, a letter of resignation. This continues to be a point of disagreement.

The early weeks of the pandemic were a stressful and emotional time for everyone. Actions needed to be taken to safeguard the lives of everyone to the greatest extent possible. Disagreements arose over how to communicate effectively and to convey the seriousness of the health crisis that the Presbytery was facing. Actions were taken which, at the time, seemed necessary, but in looking back may have lost sight of the principle of treating everyone with respect and care.

The actions taken, or not taken, during these Council meetings is but a part of the conflict and discord that led to the request for outside support from the Synod in the form of a mediation process.

The mediation team met four times with representatives from the Council (Katie Cole, SuYoung Kim and Jane Wilson) and with Moderator David Dorer. We listened to all parties about their perspectives on the events that had transpired and their motivations for the actions they took. Throughout the course of our conversations there was a growing awareness that many things could have been handled differently. There was a shared acknowledgement of the need for mutual expressions of apology and forgiveness. We explored ways to resolve and reconcile the issues at hand. We also found that these present difficulties are part of an historic pattern of behavior in the presbytery that needs to be addressed.

Our conversations led to three agreements:

1. There is a need for apologies to be expressed for the hurts that were caused. (Apologies were made in the meeting. Letters of apologies will be shared with the Presbytery);
2. There is a need to share information with the Presbytery at its September meeting (a written report from the Mediators);
3. There is a need for the Presbytery to work on communication and rebuild trust, to develop a Manual of Operations, to gain greater understanding of the various leadership roles and responsibilities within the Presbytery, and to learn how to disagree without becoming disagreeable. (resources are available through the PCUSA, https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/peacemaking/pdf/guidelines.pdf)

Accompanying this report is a letter of apology from the Council to David Dorer, a letter of apology from David to the Council, and his letter of resignation from the office of Moderator of the Presbytery.

We pray for the continuing health and safety of all God's children inside and outside the bounds of the Boston Presbytery. May the work we have done be of benefit to the current and future leaders of the Presbytery and assist in building up the body of Christ.

On behalf of the Synod of the Northeast Mediation Network,

Rev. Leah Ntuala
Rev. David Young

September 21, 2020

Dear Dave,

In this mediation process, we heard you share that in past Council meetings you felt beat up by the process (of Council moving on from topics, people changing their minds after discussion in a group vote, and using the mechanism of updating our minutes.) We heard you share that you felt that we (Council) did not give sufficient consideration to a letter that was really important to you. And, we heard you share that you wish we could have worked this conflict out (as we were able to do in mediation, but were unable to do before mediation).

We all share with you our love for the church, the utmost importance of doing our best to keep our flock safe during the coronavirus pandemic, and the urgency of communicating clearly and pastorally.

We are sorry that you felt beat up and bruised. We are sorry that you felt your letter did not get the consideration you felt it merited. And, we are sorry too that we could not resolve this conflict without outside help.

We, as Council, will learn from this experience and try to do better. We will engage in the systems work that our mediation team recommends. We will work to review and clarify the roles and responsibilities of our staff and elected officers, and we will work on how we communicate through thorny issues.

Thank you for pursuing mediation as a resolution to this conflict. Through this structured process, you have helped us practice some of the healthier modes of communication that we would like to see continue in our life together as a Presbytery. Thank you for pursuing a path of reconciliation.

Peace,

Katie Cole
SuYoung Kim
Jane Wilson
Ivy Jones Turner
Mark Wells
Sarah Hathaway
Thatcher Freeborn
Kristin Rinehimer
T.J DeMarco
Cindy Kohlmann

A Note of Apology from Presbytery of Boston Moderator, David Dorer
24 Sep 2020 12:36

As detailed in my resignation letter (attached), after Council voted to not to send the pastoral letter, I took actions that I felt were necessary based on my background and review of the medical literature. I felt that these actions were necessary to protect the well being of parishioners in our Presbytery. I understand now that those actions caused hurt, distress, and confusion for the members of the Council and others in the Presbytery. For that, I am truly sorry.

All the members of Presbytery, all Americans and, indeed, the world are feeling distress in response to this pandemic. I believe there is a genuine misunderstanding and disagreement underlying this controversy. This controversy goes to an understanding of the seriousness of the pandemic and the necessity and ability of the Presbytery to affect the actions of the churches.

It is essential for all of us involved in this controversy, myself and the Council, to remember that we are all guided by our love of the Church as we serve the Church.

May all of us be blessed,

David Dorer, Moderator, Presbytery of Boston.

Letter of Resignation to the Presbytery of Boston Council from Moderator Elder David Dorer
24 Sep 2020 13:16

The controversy underlying this letter arises from the different views of the Moderator and the Council concerning the Presbytery's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The majority of these events occurred during May 2020. For a summary narrative of this controversy please review the mediators' report from Synod mediators Leah Ntuala and David Young included here.

I believe that officers of the Presbytery have a duty of both loyalty and care to the Presbytery. As an officer, I have an obligation to apply all my knowledge, skills, judgment, and abilities in serving the Presbytery. This includes my background in epidemiology. I also believe that my actions have been guided by these principles.

I am disappointed in the Council for failing to send the pastoral letter which I feel was necessary to protect the safety and well being of our parishioners. As a way forward, I hereby resign the office of Moderator of the Presbytery of Boston effective Friday 25 September 2020 at 5:00 pm. I look forward to being an active member of our faith community in the future.

Peace,

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David Dorer, Moderator, Presbytery of Boston