

## **First RP of Grand Rapids Visitation Committee**

Below is the report of the visitation committee to First RPC of Grand Rapids. The visitation committee read the report after the morning service at First RPC on July 10. After the reading of the report there was a time of discussion between the committee and the congregation. As Presbytery is aware, First RPC has since closed, for a variety of reasons set forth in the session minutes of First RPC on August 27, 2022.

The visitation committee asks to be dismissed.

## **First RP of Grand Rapids Visitation Committee Report**

### **A. Summary of the Visitation Committee's Work**

#### **1. Remit**

The Grand Rapids Visitation Committee was appointed by the Great Lakes Gulf Presbytery at the request of three families and one individual, all members of First RP of Grand Rapids (FRPC), some of whom had expressed an intent to leave the congregation. The Committee was charged "to hear and discuss concerns raised and to offer aid and counsel for the benefit of the congregation." In pursuance of this remit, the Committee met with church officers, households, and individuals from FRPC to understand the situation that has unfolded in the congregation. The Visitation Committee is not a judicial committee and therefore does not have the jurisdiction or authority to make pronouncements on any judicial matters, should there be any.

#### **2. Assessment of the Situation**

The primary concern for the Committee at the beginning of its work was to address the disruption in relationships between the Session and certain congregational members. Although a number of concerns were raised, no one presented any formal charges. The Committee, without a formal investigation, has not seen evidence of spiritual abuse or manipulation by the Session that some were concerned about. Rather problems seem to have arisen from what we perceive to be miscommunication, misunderstandings, and mistakes made both on the part of Session and some of those who have left the congregation. This assessment of the situation influences the way we are offering aid and counsel for the benefit of the congregation. The Committee recognizes the difficulties that you, the congregation are facing, and desires to be a source of support and encouragement during these trials.

#### **3. Response**

Based on the Committee's assessment, the purpose of this report is to encourage and exhort both you, the congregation and the Session to pursue better communication, greater openness in discussing concerns and challenges, and a deeper pursuit of mutual trust between the Session and the congregation. We remind and encourage the Session as the responsible authority that, to the best of their ability, they are to be the initiators of any changes of approach or conversations that may be necessary to address situations that arise in and are affecting the congregation. We remind and encourage the entire congregation and Session that just as the cultivation of a field is a labor of love that takes patience, hard work, intentionality, and perseverance, so it is in God's field, the church. We exhort

all of you: despite challenges and setbacks, do not lose heart in the ministry of reconciliation with one another and in the work of building up the peace of Zion.

### **B. Exhortation on the Cultivation of a Healthy Church Atmosphere**

In speaking with various members of the church, it is clear that there is a close fellowship within the church. You are a people that love to hear God's word preached and spend time together. You appreciate the seriousness of worship and the in depth preaching of God's word. However, the Committee also heard that while for the most part people were blessed by the preaching, there have been a few occasions where some members of the congregation have been concerned by what they deemed harsh or hasty words from the pulpit. We note that your Pastor has relayed to us that he has on occasion spoken carelessly, repented upon being made aware of it, and sought to grow in this area. The Committee also heard from members of the congregation that he has demonstrated improvement in regards to this and the Committee encourages him to continue to strive for wisdom and sensitivity regarding these matters.

The Committee also heard that there were some members of the congregation who felt unable to speak with their elders about concerns. This kind of barrier towards open communication can happen in any congregation for a number of reasons and can manifest itself in various ways. Without implying responsibility on the Session's part for this communication barrier, we want to inform the Session that this seems to be occurring with a few members, and encourage the Session to seek to proactively address it. When members have a hesitancy or even fear of speaking to the elders openly, it can become impossible for elders to even realize what is happening. It is important that the congregation feel able to approach their elders, sense an openness to be heard, and see follow through on matters discussed, if commitments are made.

So we want to remind and encourage the Session all the more of the following:

- Watchfulness regarding the words spoken both in and out of the pulpit.
- A gentleness and patience in and out of the pulpit, even when confronting and rebuking sin (2 Timothy 2:24, 1 Thessalonians 5:14).
- Sharing of their own lives and even when appropriate their own struggles with the congregation (1 Thessalonians 2:8, Galatians 4:13-14, Romans 7:7-25).

The Committee was encouraged to hear the report from those within the congregation that the Session was already making great strides to pursue a greater openness and better communication with the congregation, whether from the pulpit or on a one-to-one basis. We believe that the Session loves and cares for you, the congregation of First RP, and the Committee further encourages you all to trust and support your elders, especially during this time of transition and uncertainty.

### **C. Advice for Dealing With Broken Relationships**

The Committee recognizes that in these difficult times at First RP, there has been some confusion about how to respond properly in the midst of strained or broken relationships. We want to remind the congregation (including departed members) of biblical principles as they process what has happened and seek to move forward.

The goal for Christians in any conflict situation should be for reconciliation. "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men." Romans 12:18

Prayer and the intention to seek reconciliation must result in communication, seeking to talk to estranged brothers and sisters. We encourage the elders and the congregation to seek reconciliation where relationships have been strained or broken. An attitude of Christian charity is to be demonstrated and a forgiving spirit is necessary. It is important to approach one another in a spirit of humility, recognizing that often there is offense on both sides and that it takes time to heal and regain trust in relationships.

In some circumstances, outside counsel and help may be necessary in considering how to approach another party regarding an offense. When seeking counsel (for example, from another minister in the denomination),

- Be clear that you are seeking counsel and not seeking to be a talebearer.
- Ask the counseling party not to pass on what you say, but to correct you if you speak wrongly about the other party or if you are slandering or talebearing.
- Come in humility and openness to receiving correction.
- Bring your concerns, but be willing to consider if they may be unwarranted.
- Consider the answer to Larger Catechism question 144, "The duties required in the ninth commandment are.... a charitable esteem of our neighbors; loving, desiring, and rejoicing in their good name; sorrowing for, and covering of their infirmities; freely acknowledging of their gifts and graces, defending their innocency; a ready receiving of good report, and unwillingness to admit of an evil report, concerning them..."

It must be remembered that all broken relationships affect not only the individuals and their families, but the whole congregation. So, all parties involved should make every effort at reconciliation.

One of the challenges in this situation is the question of Matthew 18. There is a disagreement between some among the congregation as to what extent Matthew 18 has been followed and to what extent Matthew 18 needed to be followed (i.e. in cases of alleged offenses that are deemed to be not private but public matters). Even though, at this point, matters have in some sense moved beyond one-to-one, we encourage those who have left without departing on good terms to be willing to speak to the Session at First RP and strive to be reconciled. In this, or any other situation where counsel or mediation are necessary, the Visitation Committee would be glad to help in the process of seeking reconciliation.

#### **D. Exhortation Regarding the Congregation's Future**

As mentioned at the beginning, there is much uncertainty regarding First RP's future, which has put a strain on the function of the church.

The committee recognizes the enormous pressure the Session and congregation are under due to a lack of finances to support a pastor, the need to find a new building, a potential change in leadership, and a decline in membership, all of which undoubtedly has put strain on relationships.

However, we also believe that despite the challenges, the congregation still has a reason and foundation upon which to continue. The committee, in having the opportunity to speak to several committed families, recognizes the potential of this church in Grand Rapids. The committee exhorts the congregation of First RP to hold fast and stay the course amid challenges and uncertainty. The congregation will have difficult decisions to make; nevertheless, the committee believes that the congregation has remaining life and an opportunity for further ministry.

Firstly, we recommend that the church request from Presbytery additional elders who have experience and so will be a support especially with a potential change in leadership.

After that, the congregation with the help of this additional leadership will need to ascertain the desire within its current membership on whether to continue as a body, recognizing that there will be a need to adapt to the challenges and uncertainties of the present time.

If the congregation desires to continue, it will need leadership and hearts of service at a local level. We would encourage the members of the congregation to step up and take on the daily and weekly tasks that keep the congregation running smoothly, whether that is hosting, setting up, greeting visitors, etc. We see the need for ordained leadership locally and so we encourage the congregation to consider whether the Lord has provided and called qualified men from the congregation to serve as ruling elders.

Finally, and most importantly, we urge the congregation to be in prayer for the session of First RP, for the future of the congregation, for wisdom and grace in relationships within the body, for strength and provision during these times, and for the Lord's blessing, for His glory, upon the ministry of this branch of His Church.

Respectfully submitted,

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