

## Notice of Appeal of Complaint

To Adam Keuhner, Clerk of Presbytery, Great Lakes-Gulf Presbytery (hereinafter GLGP) of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (hereinafter RPCNA).

And now, this 2<sup>nd</sup> day of November, 2023, comes Ben Manring, appellant, member of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Southside Indianapolis (hereinafter SSRPC), Indianapolis, Indiana, and gives notice of intention to appeal to the Synod of the RPCNA from the judgment of the GLGP respecting the failure of GLGP by a vote of 14 to 15 at its meeting of October 6, 2023 to sustain the appellant's complaint against the session of SSRPC, dated June 7, 2023.

### ***Reasons***

This document constitutes a notice of appeal of the GLGP's failure to sustain my complaint at its meeting of October 6, 2023. Since the appeal of the complaint is being delivered simultaneously with this notice, it is not thought necessary to specify reasons in this notice, except to say that the grounds for the appeal are injustice in the presbytery's failure sustain the complaint (BOD II.4.10). The matters complained of constitute clear violations of biblical teaching. The presbytery was unjust not to uphold biblical standards of behavior on the part of the session in its dealing with alleged sin in the church. The complaint itself contains specific reasons for the complaint and may be consulted for the purpose of ascertaining those reasons.

# Appeal of Complaint

To John M. McFarland, Clerk of Synod, Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America.

And now, this 2<sup>nd</sup> day of November 2023, comes Ben Manning, appellant, member of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Southside Indianapolis, Indiana (hereinafter SSRPC), and appeals the failure of the Great Lakes Gulf Presbytery (hereinafter GLGP) at its meeting of October 6, 2023 by a vote of 14 to 15 to sustain the appellant's complaint against the session of SSRPC, dated June 7, 2023.

## Reasons

The document that follows, including Appendices A through D, is a copy of a complaint written by the appellant to the session of SSRPC to be passed on to the GLGP for consideration at its meeting of October 6, 2023. The GLGP failed to sustain the complaint by a vote of 14 to 15. I am appealing the failure of the GLGP to sustain the complaint on the grounds of injustice (BOD II.4.10). The matters complained of constitute clear violations of biblical teaching. The presbytery was unjust not to uphold biblical standards of behavior on the part of the session in its dealing with alleged sin in the church.

The basic issue concerned the session's harsh censure and its unbiblical/unpastoral refusal to speak to me in person or reason with me from scripture regarding a letter to certain members of our congregation that I wrote and which they found objectionable. The letter itself is appended to the bottom of this appeal as Appendix E, and the reader may judge for himself whether it ought to be considered objectionable. Even if the reader finds the letter objectionable, this complaint concerns the question of whether the session of SSRPC acted biblically in the way it addressed the sin they allege that I committed in so writing. I contend that I committed no sin in writing the letter, but even if I had, the session acted out of all reasonable and biblical bounds in dealing with it the way they did.

## Complaint

To Steve Sturm, Clerk of Session, and David Hanson, Session Moderator, Reformed Presbyterian Church of Southside Indianapolis (hereinafter SSRPC) of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America.

And now, this 7<sup>th</sup> day of June, 2023, comes Ben Manning, member of SSRPC, and complains against the action of the session of SSRPC in connection with a censure of rebuke administered by said session to the complainant on May 9, 2023, and in support of said complaint sets forth the following summary and reasons.

### Summary

On April 7, 2023, the complainant (from now on referred to in the first person) sent a letter to certain members of the congregation of SSRPC informing them of the presence of public documents available on the website [PeacePurityProgress.com](https://PeacePurityProgress.com) that had a bearing on our upcoming elder election. One of the candidates for office in the congregational election had signed a complaint, a public document, demonstrating his opposition to the removal of Jared Olivetti, former pastor of the Immanuel RPC, West Lafayette, Indiana from office by the Synod Judicial Commission in March 2022. It is not irrelevant, given subsequent events, to point out that the elder candidate at the center of this controversy happens to be our senior pastor's brother-in-law. My letter was intended to render this public information accessible to certain of the voting members of the congregation in order to allow them to make an informed decision in the upcoming election.

The session of SSRPC took strong exception to my writing this letter and administered a formal rebuke to me a month later, without ever speaking to me about it or informing me of their charges ahead of time. It is significant that the session did not charge me with having misrepresented or distorted the facts that I reported. They claim that my letter was uncharitable, that it disturbed the peace of the church, and that I circumvented the alleged authority of the session to control the specific information that the congregation may be apprised of respecting an election. They afterwards (May 23) made this rebuke public, despite my having told them

previously in writing (Apr 29) and twice orally (May 9 and 16) that I would be appealing their sentence, which according to our Book of Discipline should have stopped further action on their part.

A separate notice of appeal on the substantive matters of the session's rebuke has been submitted to the session and the presbytery clerk. A full appeal will be submitted within the timeframe specified by BOD Sec. II, Ch. 4, sec. 11. Those interested in the details of the case may find them in that forthcoming documentation; the original letter I wrote to certain members of the congregation is itself already contained as an Appendix in the notice of appeal.

This present complaint is directed toward the gross procedural violations of the session's action, while the appeal is directed toward the unsubstantiable accusations of sin and issues of church government implicated in the session's rebuke. These separate issues are being divided to prevent mere matters of procedure from obscuring important questions of doctrine and practice that have been undermined by the session's charges. Therefore, I am not asking that the charges against me be dismissed based on the procedural matters discussed below. Rather, I am hoping that the presbytery will admonish the men who have been responsible for the unbiblical and unloving manner in which the session has proceeded against me and will take measures to ensure that these men will be submissive in the future to the procedures laid out in the Book of Discipline, and the Biblical precepts upon which they are based, for dealing with sin or alleged sin in the church. I am aware that by dividing these issues and insisting that I be heard on the doctrinal questions I am reducing the likelihood that the charges against me will be dismissed. I trust in the Lord that he will make good to me what he has promised, and I affirm that however this turns out, he is my confidence and hope.

### **Infractions**

1. The session made no attempt to discuss its concerns with me before they imposed a severe, formal ecclesiastical censure against me.
2. The censure itself was harsh.

3. After summoning me to a stated session meeting, the session completely ignored three emails and then a formal motion that I submitted on May 5, requesting either 1) an informal meeting with one or two of the elders in advance, or 2) that the session would at least specify what their complaint or charges against me were.
4. Without warning, the session surprised me with a rebuke delivered in the midst of a full session meeting with 9 elders, and me by myself with no counsel.
5. The charges listed in the rebuke are framed in such general terms that it is impossible to understand in what way my words are to be construed as a violation of God's law.
6. The session allotted only 10 minutes for me to reply.
7. A week after administering the rebuke, the session agreed to listen to a 40-minute rebuttal of their charges as a potential means of avoiding an appeal by me to the higher courts of the church. They did not reply at all to my defense, and refused to answer questions I asked them during the presentation. Their only response was, one week after this, to inform the congregation, by an email to all communicant members, that I had been rebuked and that the congregation was to pray for my repentance and the reformation of my life (as if there were some ongoing sin in my life that needed correction).
8. Even though the session was informed, both in writing and orally, that I would be filing an appeal, they proceeded to make the censure public, a violation of BOD Sec. II, Ch. 4, sec. 12.
9. The public rebuke was delivered by email to all communicant members, including people who have long since left the church, except for my wife and myself, who did not receive a copy of it. We were only able to see the public form of the rebuke because our children shared it with us.
10. I have apparently been permanently removed from the general church news email list—from the time at which the session's rebuke was made public (May 23) I have received no general weekly church emails—this is a testimony to the pettiness of the retaliation that characterizes this session's dealing with me.

### **Evidence and Discussion**

I will now present evidence substantiating the above list of infractions.

1. It is a simple fact that the session made no attempt to discuss with me their charges before administering this rebuke, putting me on trial without my knowledge and convicting me *in absentia*. If a church court believes a member of the church to be guilty of sin, the Book of Discipline requires the court to “contact that member in love and with care, and shall investigate the allegations,” (BOD Sec. I, Ch. 3, sec. 2). The object, as is evident from this statement is first to determine whether actual sin has occurred, and secondly, assuming it has, to gain the sinner’s repentance: “If the sinner confesses and repents, there must be forgiveness and reconciliation,” (BOD Sec. I, Ch. 3, sec. 3). Obviously, none of this can occur if the court refuses to engage the accused in conversation or to consider an answer that he might have to offer in his own defense. This is a basic standard of Christian behavior, even when individual Christians deal with other individuals regarding matters of sin. For a session that includes men who have been elders for 20, 30 and even 40 years to ignore such fundamental principles of equity and grace is inexcusable.
2. The censure itself was harsh. Some of the men on this session had previously recommended only a censure of *Admonition* for a group of elders who were guilty of gross negligence over the course of at least 15 months that led to the sexual abuse of numerous children. I, on the other hand, wrote one letter, which I believe any impartial reader would have difficulty showing contains error or ill-will, and I am deemed worthy of the harsher censure of *Rebuke*. A *Rebuke* is intended to address persistent sin. Form 28 for *Rebuke* in the RPCNA Constitution says, “You \_\_\_\_\_, *by your continued neglect* of your Christian duty and by the sin of \_\_\_\_\_, have brought reproach on yourself, and *have given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to mock and curse* [emphases mine].” Is that really what I did in writing a letter to let people know about relevant public information bearing on our election?
3. The session’s summons and refusal to describe their charges or the purpose of the meeting made me suspect that they were going to try something of the sort described under item 1. I therefore made an explicit request by email, first to Pastor Hanson, then to all the session, that a couple of them either meet with me informally first, or that the court at least specify what their charges against me were. They refused to do this. I then submitted a formal motion to the court with this same request. They ignored my motion completely, not

even acknowledging that they received it. The documentation of this sequence of communications is found in Appendix A.

We can say that this is unprofessional behavior, which it certainly is. The civil courts operate in a much more orderly fashion. Here is the description of a Civil Summons from a law dictionary: "A civil summons accompanies a complaint in a civil lawsuit or family law matter.... The summons specifies the court in which the action is filed, and information about answering the lawsuit. The complaint provides comprehensive information about the lawsuit itself." In other words, you are not summoned into a criminal or even a civil court without the charges against you being specified and opportunity being given you for a defense.

Beyond considerations of professionalism, though, it is patently unbiblical to refuse the request of a brother you are accusing of sin to meet with him. The biblical pattern is to reduce the escalation of disciplinary matters to the lowest level possible (Mt 18:15-17). In contrast, the session, refusing all overture to reduce the escalation, escalated the matter immediately and imposed the highest degree of censure that they thought they could possibly get away with, even making the matter public.

4. Upon my arrival at the session meeting on May 9, there was no attempt to discuss anything with me. I sat down. The moderator read a letter of rebuke and handed it to me. It seemed to be intended to take me by surprise. The nine elders sat silently and just looked at me. I managed to keep my temper, but this kind of action without warning is simply provoking and mean-spirited. Ephesians 6:2 says, "Fathers, provoke not your children to wrath."
5. The rebuke from the session itself is contained in Appendix B. This rebuke is essentially a listing of sins connected with the Ninth Commandment and a statement of the general obligation for Christians to love one another. There is no explanation of how my words constituted a violation of the law and, in particular, it is not possible to distinguish whether their accusations of my violation of the Ninth Commandment involve a charge of slander or of malicious gossip. I assume that it is not slander because I'm sure they would have specified misrepresentation of the truth if they thought they could demonstrate it. However, my point is, the rebuke itself does not contain an argument intended to persuade me that I broke the law. It is not an attempt to gain my repentance, which I am convinced has not been any part of their object in this entire matter.

6. After a minute's reflection during the session meeting at which the rebuke was delivered, described under item 4, I asked if I might be granted an opportunity to reply. They said I could have 10 minutes. I said that I did not regard that as a genuine opportunity to reply to their charges and that I would be appealing to the presbytery. They said they had no time to talk to me further that evening but, in order to avoid a potential appeal, they agreed to reassemble the following week to give me an opportunity to defend myself and ask them to reconsider.
7. I did come back and presented a 40-minute defense the next week. However, none of them interacted with anything I said, and they declined to answer several questions that I asked during the presentation. The substance of this defense will appear in my appeal, but again, my point is that this group of men made no attempt to discuss with me their charges, to refute my answer, or to persuade me that I had sinned. You might think they would say something like, "Mr. Manring, we hear what you are saying, but here is why you are wrong." Instead, a week later they simply sent me a note saying they would be publishing notice of the rebuke publicly. This is nothing less than an answering of reason with force and it is entirely out of accord with biblical church process. See the email from Steve Sturm in Appendix C.
8. The session's making this rebuke public is a violation of BOD Sec. II, Ch. 4, sec. 12, "The notice of appeal shall serve to restrain the lower court from administering the censures of admonition or rebuke until the case has been determined by the higher court." Both during my defense on May 16, and at the session meeting on May 9, I told the session that I would be appealing their decision to a higher court. I had also expressed the same intention to appeal by email in writing on April 29 (see my email of April 29 in Appendix A), prospectively considering that they might try such a thing as to administer a formal admonition without speaking to me or hearing me. The BOD gives me 30 days to file a notice of appeal, and all of this together should have restrained their action. This illegal measure is only further testimony that these men are not seeking my repentance, but are simply retaliating against my challenge of their iron control on the information our church may receive regarding an officer election.
- 9, 10. Lastly, my name has been removed from the email distribution list of the church following the session's notification that the rebuke would be made public. They didn't send



me or my wife a copy of the public announcement, but it went to people who have not been attending our services for months and possibly years. I had to get a copy from my children who were kept on the list. See the copy in Appendix D. Since the public announcement of the rebuke I have not received any email from the church as I had up until that time. This is improper, petty and unnecessary.

## **Requested Remediation**

Matthew Henry, commenting on Isaiah 66:5, writes, "It is no new thing for church censures to be misapplied, and for her artillery, which was intended for her defense, to be turned against her best friends." I can at least say that I aspire to be one of the church's friends, despite the ill-founded view that my own elders have taken of me simply for writing a letter that tended to thwart their desires for the outcome of a church election. These men have abused me publicly and have refused to deal with me according to any semblance of justice. The boldness of their neglect and lack of care for proper order demonstrates that they have little fear for the consequences of their misdeeds being brought under review of the higher church courts. It makes me wonder what has happened to other individuals who have become the subjects of their ire but who have, instead, just left the church in discouragement. I believe they thought I would do the same thing and would just leave the church. This is not the pattern that is followed by sound ministers of the Christ who laid down his life for the sheep; rather it is akin to the behavior of the ungodly Diotrephes who would cast the very brethren out of the church (3 Jn 10).

My belief is that the men on this session require stern admonition, significant remedial education for how to conduct church discipline, and must demonstrate to the satisfaction of the presbytery that their repentance is genuine. I also request that they apologize to me and my wife individually and in person for the way they have treated me, and for the stress they have inflicted on us as a family. We have been made to feel most unwelcome in this local body of Christ. Something should also be said of the valuable time they have wasted of mine, of their own, and of the officers in the wider church who now must adjudicate this matter. I also request that the presbytery patiently hear my forthcoming appeal on the substantive matters of sound church polity and equity that have been called into question in the session's spurious charges.

## Appendix A

Evidence demonstrating the SSRPC session's refusal to meet with me or specify what the charges against me were prior to delivering their censure of rebuke

**From:** David Hanson <[davidrpts@hotmail.com](mailto:davidrpts@hotmail.com)>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, April 25, 2023 2:18 PM  
**To:** [Ben@ManringFamily.Net](mailto:Ben@ManringFamily.Net); Steve Sturm <[stevesturm@pobox.com](mailto:stevesturm@pobox.com)>  
**Subject:** Meeting with the session

Ben,

The session would like to meet with you regarding your recent e-mail to many in the congregation concerning the elder election. Our regular May session meeting is on the 9th, but if you are still coming up to Indianapolis on Saturdays to protest at the clinic, we might be able to meet up then or on a different weeknight if we can make it work.

Anyway, if you would let us know 2 dates in the next couple of weeks that would work well for you, we can check with the elders and get something set up. Otherwise, we can just include a time with you on the 5/9 agenda.

In Christ,  
DWH

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**From:** [Ben@ManringFamily.Net](mailto:Ben@ManringFamily.Net) <[Ben@ManringFamily.Net](mailto:Ben@ManringFamily.Net)>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, April 25, 2023 8:32 PM  
**To:** 'David Hanson' <[davidrpts@hotmail.com](mailto:davidrpts@hotmail.com)>; 'Steve Sturm' <[stevesturm@pobox.com](mailto:stevesturm@pobox.com)>  
**Subject:** RE: Meeting with the session

Dear David,

I'm happy to talk to you about my letter, but since I don't expect that you are asking me to come in to receive a commendation for writing it, I'd like to know what it is that you object to before I join a meeting on the subject with all of you. I've been straightforward with you, CC'ing the session on what I wrote. I shared only public information, but if you think I misrepresented you in some way inconsistent with what you or Nick did in public, please let me know what that is so that I might understand ahead of time what you want to discuss.

Yours sincerely,

*Ben*

Ben Manring  
10285 S Auburn Hills Dr  
Edinburgh, IN 46124  
(C) 812-344-7160  
(H) 812-703-1240  
[Ben@ManringFamily.net](mailto:Ben@ManringFamily.net)

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**From:** David Hanson <[davidrpts@hotmail.com](mailto:davidrpts@hotmail.com)>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, April 26, 2023 3:08 PM  
**To:** [Ben@ManringFamily.Net](mailto:Ben@ManringFamily.Net); 'Steve Sturm' <[stevesturm@pobox.com](mailto:stevesturm@pobox.com)>  
**Subject:** Re: Meeting with the session

Hi Ben,

The session believes that we have things to say to you that are important to say in person and not via e-mail. We are not expecting you to respond within the initial meeting itself, so you don't need to prepare anything ahead of time. In many regards, the optimum time for us would be at our regular session meeting of 5/9, but we were trying to save you a trip if we could all make it work.

In Christ, DWH

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**From:** [Ben@ManringFamily.Net](mailto:Ben@ManringFamily.Net) <[Ben@ManringFamily.Net](mailto:Ben@ManringFamily.Net)>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, April 26, 2023 8:43 PM  
**To:** 'David Hanson' <[davidrpts@hotmail.com](mailto:davidrpts@hotmail.com)>; 'Steve Sturm' <[stevesturm@pobox.com](mailto:stevesturm@pobox.com)>  
**Cc:** [session@ssrpc.org](mailto:session@ssrpc.org) <[session@ssrpc.org](mailto:session@ssrpc.org)>  
**Subject:** RE: Meeting with the session

David,

I don't mean to be disrespectful, but you are summoning me to a court of the church. You have every right to do that, but if you are going to proceed with this degree of formality, I should be apprised of the charges or complaints or whatever it is that you want to lay against me. If you think I have erred in a way that warrants less than a court summons, the scriptural method is to come to me, either by yourself or with someone else—and I'm willing to meet you somewhere more convenient for you on those

terms—but to call me to appear in court on such general grounds has the appearance of an act of intimidation. I wish you would reconsider.

Sincerely,



Ben Manring  
10285 S Auburn Hills Dr  
Edinburgh, IN 46124  
(C) 812-344-7160  
(H) 812-703-1240  
[Ben@ManringFamily.net](mailto:Ben@ManringFamily.net)

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**From:** David Hanson <[davidrpts@hotmail.com](mailto:davidrpts@hotmail.com)>  
**Sent:** Friday, April 28, 2023 1:15 PM  
**To:** [Ben@ManringFamily.Net](mailto:Ben@ManringFamily.Net); 'Steve Sturm' <[stevesturm@pobox.com](mailto:stevesturm@pobox.com)>  
**Subject:** Re: Meeting with the session

Hi Ben,

To reiterate, the session asked me to set up a time for you to meet with the session. I don't have the authority to modify that request on my own. We would like for you to meet with us @ 7:30 p.m. on May 9 @ the church unless that doesn't work for you.

In Christ,

David

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**From:** [Ben@ManringFamily.Net](mailto:Ben@ManringFamily.Net) <[Ben@ManringFamily.Net](mailto:Ben@ManringFamily.Net)>  
**Sent:** Saturday, April 29, 2023 5:07 PM  
**To:** 'David Hanson' <[davidrpts@hotmail.com](mailto:davidrpts@hotmail.com)>; 'Steve Sturm' <[stevesturm@pobox.com](mailto:stevesturm@pobox.com)>  
**Cc:** 'session@ssrpc.org' <[session@ssrpc.org](mailto:session@ssrpc.org)>  
**Subject:** RE: Meeting with the session

David,

I'm obviously not asking you to modify the decision on your own. You saw that I CC'ed the session on my request. There has been no session meeting since I sent my letter to a number of members of the congregation, yet you had some sort of meeting to discuss my letter, so it is plain that you have the ability to meet briefly and discuss such matters

as the request I made in my last email. To claim that you don't have any authority to deal with my simple request prior to a session meeting that is more than 10 days away seems disingenuous.

Please discuss this among yourselves. I regard your request for a meeting of the kind you suggest, namely in church court, refusing to tell me what you want to talk about, as unjust and ungracious. I have offered to meet you privately, or with a companion from the session if you wish. If you insist on forcing me to appear in church court on these unreasonable terms, I will do so, but it will be done under protest and may form part of an appeal to the higher courts of our church.

As you seem so intent on meeting with me without telling me what your objection is, it seems to me that you have probably made some decision in my absence and simply wish to inform me what it is. If you intend to admonish me or rebuke me, I hope you will give the idea careful consideration. Supposing you are unable to convince me that I have sinned, I will certainly appeal such a sentence. [Highlighting is not in the original email, but is inserted here to demonstrate that I communicated my intention in writing to appeal their sentence]. Since there is no presbytery meeting between now and the next meeting of synod, this will drag on for more than a year, and is certainly not something I want to have to be involved in myself or to involve you in.

I recall that the commission tasked by our presbytery to implement the steps of repentance imposed by the West Lafayette Presbytery Judicial Commission, a commission that was made up partially of members of our session and congregation, thought that an admonition was a sufficient sentence for a group of elders who, among other things, negligently allowed children in their congregation to continue being sexually abused for a year or more. Are you prepared to place me in the same category for performing what I regarded as a duty to inform members of our congregation that Nick Ritenour signed a public complaint on a subject of relevance to the safety of the church? These matters seem quite unequal.



Ben Manring  
10285 S Auburn Hills Dr  
Edinburgh, IN 46124

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**From:** Ben@ManringFamily.Net <Ben@ManringFamily.Net>

**Sent:** Friday, May 5, 2023 7:42 PM

**To:** David Hanson (DavidRPTS@Hotmail.com) <DavidRPTS@Hotmail.com>; Steve Sturm (stevesturm@pobox.com) <stevesturm@pobox.com>

**Cc:** Mark Hart (mhart200@gmail.com) <mhart200@gmail.com>; John Cavanaugh (jcavanau@gmail.com) <jcavanau@gmail.com>; John Hanson (johnnhanson@att.net) <johnnhanson@att.net>; Ross Cerbus (ross@thecerbuses.com) <ross@thecerbuses.com>; David Kleyn (kleyn.david@sbcglobal.net) <kleyn.david@sbcglobal.net>; Don Prichard (pdon@sbcglobal.net) <pdon@sbcglobal.net>; Ian Wise (iwisercp@gmail.com) <iwisercp@gmail.com>; Jerry Porter (jerry.l.porter@sbcglobal.net) <jerry.l.porter@sbcglobal.net>

**Subject:** Motion for clarification

Since the session seems unwilling to answer the questions I have posed regarding the summons I received by email from Pastor Hanson on April 25, I now enter a formal motion requesting an answer. My questions, having been CC'ed to the session, should have been regarded as informal motions to begin with, but since you as a session are refusing courteously to consider or even to acknowledge my requests, I am obliged to put this more formally:

**Motion that Session clarify their summons:**

I formally ask the session to clarify the terms of their summons and answer the questions I have been asking them:

- 1) Are one or two of you willing to meet with me privately to explain what your complaint against me is?
- 2) If you are refusing to meet with me privately, will you state the reason for summoning me to court on May 9, and if I am being charged with some sin, will you explain the specific sin I am called to answer for? (I will add that as I have been asking this question since the 25<sup>th</sup> of last month, it's rather late for the session to proceed in this manner. Furthermore, it appears to me that this is not even a lawful procedure according to the Book of Discipline).
- 3) If you refuse to meet with me privately, and you refuse to specify why I am being called into court, do you still require me to appear on Tuesday, May 9? With your lack of communication, I am unclear on even this much.

Respectfully,

Ben Manring  
10285 S Auburn Hills Dr  
Edinburgh, IN 46124

## Appendix B



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### Reformed Presbyterian Church of Southside Indianapolis

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May 9, 2023

Mr. Ben Manring  
10285 S Auburn Hills Drive  
Edinburgh, Indiana. 46124

Dear Ben,

We, the Southside Session, are formally writing to you to address your email with the subject line “West Lafayette church issue as related to our elder election” that was distributed to many in the congregation on April 7, 2023.

Our Lord and his apostles give commands in scripture to the church describing how we are to treat one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. A survey of numerous New Testament texts that include the words “one another” yield a wealth of wisdom. We are commanded to *love* one another, to pursue *unity* and *peace* with one another, and to demonstrate an attitude of *humility* and *deference* to one another. For example:

*This is My commandment, that you love **one another**, just as I have loved you.* John 15:12

*Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to **one another** with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to **one another**; ... Be of the same mind toward **one another**. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion.* Romans 12:9-10, 16

*I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with **one another** in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.* Ephesians 4:1-3

Our Catechisms’ exposition of God’s law makes it clear that the duties required, and the sins forbidden demand that we give careful attention when dealing with “the good name of our neighbor.”

LC Q. 144. *What are the duties required in the ninth commandment?*

A. The duties required in the ninth commandment are, the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man, and the good name of our neighbor, as well as our own; appearing and standing for the truth; and from the heart, sincerely, freely, clearly, and fully, speaking the truth, and only the truth, in matters of judgment and justice, and in all other things whatsoever; 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 a good report, and unwillingness to admit of an evil report, concerning them; discouraging talebearers, flatterers, and slanderers; love and care of



our own good name, and defending it when need requireth; keeping of lawful promises; [studying and practicing of whatsoever things are true, honest, lovely, and of good report.](#)

LC Q. 145. *What are the sins forbidden in the ninth commandment?*

A. The sins forbidden in the ninth commandment are, [all prejudicing the truth, and the good name of our neighbors](#), as well as our own, [especially in public judicature](#); giving false evidence, suborning false witnesses, wittingly appearing and pleading for an evil cause, outfacing and overbearing the truth; passing unjust sentence, calling evil good, and good evil; rewarding the wicked according to the work of the righteous, and the righteous according to the work of the wicked; forgery, concealing the truth,

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(317) 787-1211 [www.ssrpc.org](http://www.ssrpc.org)  
Senior Pastor David W. Hanson ~ Associate Pastor Ian E. Wise

undue silence in a just cause, and [holding our peace when iniquity calleth for either a reproof from ourselves, or complaint to others; speaking the truth unseasonably, or maliciously to a wrong end, or perverting it to a wrong meaning, or in doubtful or equivocal expressions, to the prejudice of the truth or justice](#); speaking untruth, lying, slandering, backbiting, detracting, talebearing, whispering, scoffing, reviling, rash, harsh, and partial censuring; misconstruing intentions, words, and actions; flattering, vainglorious boasting, thinking or speaking too highly or too meanly of ourselves or others; denying the gifts and graces of God; aggravating smaller faults; hiding, excusing, or extenuating of sins, when called to a free confession; [unnecessary discovering of infirmities](#); raising false rumors, receiving and countenancing evil reports, and stopping our ears against just defense; evil suspicion; envying or grieving at the deserved credit of any; endeavoring or desiring to impair it, rejoicing in their disgrace and infamy; scornful contempt, fond admiration; breach of lawful promises; neglecting such things as are of good report, and practicing, or not avoiding ourselves, or not hindering what we can in others, such things as procure an ill name.

At our April 11, 2023, session meeting, the elders judged your email to be an uncharitable communication about brothers and sisters in Christ and disruptive to the peace and harmony of the church.

*Uncharitable communication* — In the email, you publicly brought into question the fitness of a man to serve as an elder, one who is a member in good standing and presently serving well as a deacon. *For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.* (1Timothy 3:13). If elected by the congregation, he will in due time be examined by Session before proceeding to serve.

*Disruptive to the peace and harmony of the church* — In the email, you have shown disrespect for the courts of the church by taking it upon yourself to instruct the congregation directly how they should vote in the elder election. Session has given the instruction we deem appropriate and necessary for the elder election and left it as a matter of private judgement for communicant members to vote for qualified men. Our Presbyterian system of government provides a process for appealing decisions of a court. You have circumvented this process.

We as your elders and brothers in Christ judge that your April 7, 2023, email is worthy of censure. *Therefore, this Court of Christ's Church sadly and solemnly rebukes you for your sin. You are commanded to give evidence of sincere repentance, and to be more watchful, studying to know and do the will of God.*

We are praying that you will receive our rebuke with godly humility and follow with godly actions of repentance and reconciliation.

Yours in the Chief Shepherd,  
The Session of Southside Indianapolis Reformed Presbyterian Church

## Appendix C

**From:** Steve Sturm <stevesturm@pobox.com>

**Sent:** Monday, May 22, 2023 10:41 AM

**To:** Ben Manring <ben@manringfamily.net>

**Subject:** update

Dear Ben,

We want to inform you that we intend to 'make the people under [Session's] oversight publicly aware of the fact and reason for the rebuke.' (Book of Discipline, I.4.1.b) We will do this via an email addressed to communicant members.

Yours in Christ,

Southside Session

## Appendix D

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **Steve Sturm** <[stevesturm@pobox.com](mailto:stevesturm@pobox.com)>

Date: Tue, May 23, 2023 at 10:03 AM

Subject: Communication from Session

To: Elizabeth Manring <[elizabeth.manring@gmail.com](mailto:elizabeth.manring@gmail.com)>

Dear Congregation,

On April 7, many of you received an email from Ben Manring, with the heading, 'West Lafayette church issue as related to our church election.' It is the judgment of your Session of Elders that this was an uncharitable and divisive communication, disruptive to the peace of the Church. In keeping with the public nature of the offense, we are notifying you that Session has issued our brother Ben a rebuke.

As the Book of Discipline says, the goal of a rebuke is to 'call for repentance and reformation of life.' Please be in ongoing and earnest prayer for this situation.

Southside Session

## Appendix E

### ***Letter of Ben Manning to Certain Members of SSRPC***

7 April 2023

Dear friends,

I am writing to bring to your attention an issue of importance in our church. I realize this is a long email, and I apologize for its length ahead of time. Nonetheless, I hope you will take the time to read it because of the importance of the subject. I have tried to make it simpler to read by head-lining sections in bold type.

#### **The scandal in West Lafayette and the failure of our presbytery to deal with it**

As many of you are aware, for the past couple of years our presbytery has been enmeshed in a serious and—within our presbytery, at least—irresolvable conflict with respect to a serial, predatory child abuse case in the Immanuel Reformed Presbyterian Church congregation in West Lafayette, involving at least 15 victims and over 100 documented incidents. The perpetrator of the crimes is identified in redacted public church documents as the son of the pastor who was serving at the time [*Report of the Immanuel Judicial Commission*, pp. 6, 13]. The young man was convicted in juvenile court and essentially incarcerated for committing what would have been multiple felonies if he had been an adult.

You may also be aware that upon the failure of our presbytery to adequately address the problem (the Presbytery was basically divided into two parties that differed radically in how to deal with it), our Synod, the national governing body of our church, finally had to step in and resolve the matter by removing the Immanuel RPC elders and the pastor from office. This was because, among other things, they failed to adequately protect the children of the congregation for 9 to 15 months after learning of the abuse (some of the West Lafayette elders learned of the abuse later than others). The pastor was offered mediation in order to avoid a church discipline trial, but he was not cooperative. A trial was then called, he was summoned twice, but he refused to appear in court.

The Synod's judicial commission conducting the trial determined unanimously that the pastor ought no longer to be a minister in the church of Jesus Christ (*i.e.*, not just in the RPCNA). The Presbytery's own investigatory commission had come to the same conclusion a year earlier, and another church in West Lafayette outside of the RPCNA (a church that was involved in counseling the Immanuel session and at least one victim of the abuse) concluded, "The father of the abuser should resign his position at the church, along with any other church leaders who had knowledge of these facts." The magnitude of the pastor's sin in this affair is indicated in that the commission of Synod convicted him of breaking eight of the Ten Commandments, and in

failing to manage his household well (a requirement for church office as specified in 1 Timothy 3:4-5 and Titus 1:6).

A summary of church action, along with the public documents, may be found at the web site link below. A minister from elsewhere in our denomination has seen the necessity of collecting this information, summarizing it, and making it available to the church at large. It is otherwise difficult to understand the enormity of the scandal and the extremely poor way in which our presbytery handled it:

<https://peacepurityprogress.com/summary/>

**How does this tragic history relate to our upcoming elder election?** It is important for church members voting in this election to be aware that one of the candidates on the ballot has signed a public complaint objecting to both the trial of the West Lafayette pastor and the verdict of the Synod Commission in finding him guilty. The signatures of the complainants are found on p. 341 of the Synod Minutes for 2022, here

[2022 Minutes of Synod, pp. 339, ff.](#)

To give you an idea of how unsound the vast majority of elders in our denomination view this complaint, it was rejected by Synod on a vote of 120 to 13.

To be fair to our elder candidate, there were many signatures on this complaint from ordinary members of the churches, mostly from the West Lafayette, Second RP and Southside congregations. Our own senior pastor and a retired minister who is now a member of our church both felt so strongly that Synod was wrong to reject this complaint and overturn their discipline, that they asked that their names be recorded in public protest against the Synod vote. Similar complaints emanating from our presbytery were rejected by Synod majorities of 109 to 14, 117 to 9, 114 to 6, and 125 to 1, often with the same protesters voicing their strong dissent at the conclusion of the votes.

Whatever you want to think about these votes and the protests against them, it should at least be clear to you that this vocal minority from our presbytery—a group of men that for the past couple of years has been instrumental in preventing any disciplinary action that would remove the West Lafayette session or its pastor from office—is an anomaly within our denomination.

I am sorry that I have felt compelled to bring this matter to your attention. The elder candidate in question is someone I both like and admire, and one whom I had even considered nominating for elder myself. After speaking to him personally about the presence of his signature on this document, he nonetheless affirms that he continues to stand by what is written. If there is a question about the legitimacy of my sharing this with you, the fact is, this is all public information, and I am sharing it with you in a manner that is consistent with the nature of the events described and documents cited. My comments are necessarily colored by my own perspective, but they nonetheless coincide with the majority view of the Synod. However, I am

sending this information early enough for you to ask the elder candidate himself about these matters if you think it will help you better understand the issues at stake.

**Why is this a large enough concern that I deemed it necessary to write to you?** Let me first be clear that this is not an accusation of sin against this good man. It instead concerns 1) his judgment and 2) his adherence to the Presbyterian form of government contained in our constitutional documents.

The question of good judgment may be gauged both by the overwhelming response of Synod to the complaint that our elder candidate signed, and the facts surrounding the case in general. There is no question that the West Lafayette pastor needed to be removed from office, and it should have happened long before it finally did. One of the main reasons that it took so long was because of protests and complaints—very similar in substance to the one we are talking about—that prevented the Presbytery from taking swift and essential action. According to the Synod Judicial Committee oral report to the 2022 Synod, “Five courts of this denomination have been involved over the past 26 months and this Synod will be the sixth. We must come to resolution of the matter and not delay the ecclesiastical judicial process any longer.” If the complaint under consideration had been successful in reversing Synod’s discipline, this unfit man would still be pastor of the West Lafayette congregation today.

As it stands, the work of our entire church has been side-tracked (8,000 to 10,000 man hours at the Synod level alone) and our presbytery and the Synod beset with expensive lawsuits (perhaps this is news to you). And all of this over a matter that has several plain and simple answers in Scripture, any one of which disqualifies a man like the former pastor of the West Lafayette church from being a church officer (“One who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence,” 1 Tim 3:4; “A man... having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination,” Tit 1:6; “Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside,” 1 Tim 3:7; “You shall not bear false witness,” Ex 20:16).

**Regarding fidelity to the Presbyterian form of government**, it needs to be understood that in addition to protesting the conviction of the West Lafayette pastor, the complaint we are discussing also requested that the Synod judiciary action be voided in favor of “an independent, professional, and unbiased investigation.” As good as that might sound on first hearing, it is not the way biblical Presbyterian government works. It is certainly true that professionals may be consulted by presbyterial investigators—as many of them were by both the Synod investigators and the earlier Presbytery investigatory commission. These commissions of the church even included several professionals experienced in child welfare (attorneys, professional counselors, a Department of Child Services employee, a police officer) who were also elders. But the investigation is to be carried out by elders in the church, not by “independent” professional agencies.

A lack of confidence in the efficacy of Presbyterian government to deal with this situation has been part-and-parcel of the objections to disciplining the West Lafayette session and the church’s pastor throughout these proceedings. Here are some examples:

- I was present at the 2021 Synod when one minister in a floor speech explicitly claimed that Presbyterianism was incapable of dealing with such matters and that what was needed was a few men to gather around the offenders and just work it out informally—no discipline.
- One of the more troubling and unreasonable objections that has been advanced is that there is secret information that can't be revealed, but which exonerates the men involved from many of the charges against them. This principle, of course, overthrows any attempt to exercise church discipline and hence to govern the church at all.
- Again, the wider church has been led to believe that the West Lafayette issue is just too complicated for anyone to understand, and so it can't be adjudicated. Let me quote from the oral report of the Synod Judicial Commission to the 2022 Synod: "Another recurring question I must address is the narrative that thinks this is 'too complex a situation for our denomination.' . . . When the truth became known, and when the evidence was organized and presented, it wasn't as complex a case as hyped. That evidence and the accompanying testimony was clear and convincing."

Given the supermajority votes in favor of the Synod Judicial Commission's actions, the oral report of the Commission to the 2022 meeting of Synod is a good short summary of how the church leadership outside of our own presbytery views this matter, and I commend it to you if you want to understand the matter further:

[Oral Report SJC to Synod \(wordpress.com\)](#)

I have taken the trouble to write to you because, even though these documents and the complaint we have been discussing are matters of public record, I doubted whether most of you knew about them and realized the scope of what you were voting on. You will be voting, in part, on questions of the nature of church government, the nature of church office, and how we are to interpret the scriptural qualifications for it. As a Presbyterian, you are voting on the impact our local church election has on the wider church. As it turns out, that impact can be far-reaching and may involve grave consequences.

Yours sincerely,



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