

Report from the Synod of the Covenant Presbytery of Detroit Administrative Commission

Because the “presenting problem” this Administrative Commission was asked to respond to (conflict between the Teaching Elder Rev. Dr. Flo Barbee-Watkins and Commissioned Ruling Elder Charon Barconey) was essentially ended with the resignation of TE Barbee-Watkins, this commission finds that we cannot delve into that situation effectively beyond what we have concluded in this document. Though the presenting problem is no longer existent, we do have recommendations based on this incident for the Presbytery of Detroit to address.

What you will find below are our findings concerning that conflict, plus reflections on the culture of the Presbytery of Detroit, and the recommendations for further responses. We submit this report prayerfully and with hope for our siblings in the Christ in the Presbytery of Detroit.

CRE Barconey

CRE Barconey has worked for the Presbytery of Detroit for a number of years, in a variety of positions, many of which required on her to manage her own work. It seems that with this history of independent work, she was resistant to being managed and supervised by someone else.ⁱ

On the other hand, CRE Barconey was working without an agreed upon job description, and her performance has not been regularly reviewed by a supervisor or committee. She did not receive timely feedback about her job performance

She followed the Presbytery’s grievance procedure correctly.

One of CRE Barconey’s responses to conflicts was to email people in the Presbytery whom she perceived as supporters of her situation. This is a kind of triangularization and is not recommended for healthy working relationships. However, we recognize that this kind of recruiting of allies seems to be a normal part of the culture of the Presbytery of Detroit. CRE Barconey was simply following the processes known in the culture in which she functioned.

CRE Barconey brought her son, Michael Barconey, to speak to the Coordinating Cabinetⁱⁱ in the midst of this situation. This is another example of gathering support from others, outside of the situation, that lent her additional power and influence. We are divided as a commission as to whether this was positive or negative action but recognize that it is a normalized part of Presbytery culture.

TE Barbee-Watkins

In accepting her call within the Presbytery, TE Barbee-Watkins was plunged into a difficult environment in the midst of the pandemic. She had no experience with the culture of the Presbytery of Detroit and because so many people were working from home, she had little opportunity to learn how to navigate the shoals of this culture.

TE Barbee-Watkins initially relied upon CRE Barcone as her primary support—a relationship that started out as a positive friendship but one that deteriorated over time. As CRE Barcone's manager, TE Barbee-Watkins should have established better personal and professional boundaries with CRE Barcone.

Even though tensions between the two women were already high, TE Barbee-Watkins had a responsibility to complete a timely version of CRE Barcone's performance review. She should have provided on-going feedback on TE Barbee-Watkins's work, including formal and informal performance improvement plans where appropriate.

CRE Barcone and TE Barbee-Watkins

Between TE Barbee-Watkins and CRE Barcone, we see a lack of complete, honest, and productive communication. Full communication is a cycle, starting with an initial statement and then proceeding with clarifying statements by both parties, until both are satisfied that they have the same understanding of a situation, idea, or question. It seems that conversations between CRE Barcone and TE Barbee-Watkins were often incomplete, leaving them with different interpretations and expectations.

Operations Committee

We can find little evidence that the Operations Committee effectively helped resolve the antagonism between TE Barbee-Watkins and CRE Barcone. We recognize that some of this probably had to do with the timing of the problem, occurring just as one set of committee members were revolving off and new members were joining the group.

We are concerned that the gathered evidence indicated that the committee allied itself primarily with TE Barbee-Watkins during this conflict.

Reaching out for direction on how to resolve the problem was not a bad thing, but jumping to an employment ultimatum (Performance Improvement Plan) should not have been the first step in trying to rectify the situation.

Since this committee is charged with overseeing the personnel functions of the presbytery, and has Human Resources professionals and experts among their membership, they need to be more active in making sure that performance evaluations/reviews and other Human Resources functions are happening in a timely manner and with an "agnostic" (objective) approach to the individuals involved. Rather, the process and system should be established to promote justice and equity without consideration of the personal histories with the involved parties.

The Presbytery

Nearly everyone we spoke with referenced the "toxicity" of the Presbytery's culture. There are numerous problems in the culture/family system that is the Presbytery of Detroit—problems that go beyond particular individuals or boards.

The Presbytery of Detroit in its current state is dysfunctional.

We see a lack of trust, a lack of transparency, struggles for power, issues of racism and fear of racism, an over-dependence on legalism, and an underlying assumption that “others” are either incompetent or malicious. Overall, this is as a fear-based system.

If the presbytery as a whole does not engage in serious work to address this culture, problems like the one between TE Barbee-Watkins and CRE Barconey will continue to occur.

Findings and Recommendations

As reported above, the Synod of the Covenant Administrative Commission to the Presbytery of Detroit, upon investigation, has discovered that the disorder within the Presbytery is much broader than initially believed. The dynamics of mistrust and animosity include leaders beyond those serving on the Operations Committee and the Coordinating Cabinet. This disorder, which is both systemic and structural, needs to be addressed and resolved.

The Administrative Commission recommends that the Synod of the Covenant expand the purpose, scope and authority of the AC to include:

- Inquiring into and settling disorder that exists throughout the structure of the Presbytery of Detroit by working across all ministry teams/committees/leaders to:
 - Review and clearly define the tasks and authority of each ministry team/committee and how they relate to other ministry teams/committees and the Presbytery as a whole
 - Review position descriptions of each member of staff and revise as needed as soon as possible
 - Review the bylaws, manual of operations and staff structure and revise as needed so the documents are consistent with one another and add further clarity as to roles and authorities of ministry teams/committees, staff and elected leaders
 - Explore the use of power, processes and procedures in deliberative and decision-making processes and provide education from outside trainers and coaches about appropriate uses of same. Expenses for these services if needed are to be paid by the Presbytery of Detroit.
 - Address issues of mistrust, lack of transparency and conflicts of interest between leaders and members of the presbytery.
- Affirming the Administrative Commission’s authority as follows:
 - That the Administrative Commission has the full authority of the Synod of the Covenant, except where limited by provisions of the PC(USA) Book of Order, only in matters pertaining to the Presbytery of Detroit to address personnel matters, boundary, authority, process, mistrust issues, misuse of power, systemic and structural disorder that exists in the Presbytery of Detroit and among Presbytery leaders and some members.
 - If it is determined by the Administrative Commission that the Presbytery of Detroit is unable or unwilling to manage its affairs wisely, the Administrative Commission may, after a thorough investigation and full opportunity to be heard has been accorded to the

presbytery, assume original jurisdiction of the presbytery, which shall cease to act until such time the Synod shall otherwise direct (G-3.0303e).

- It is probable that the expanded purpose and scope will require skills and experience of those not currently serving on the Administrative Commission. It is in order for the moderator to appoint additional members to the Administrative Commission.

Signed by the members of the Synod of the Covenant Administration Commission for the Presbytery of Detroit.

Jeanne Gay, TE, Maumee Valley

Carmen Cox-Harwell, TE, Western Reserve

Betsy Rees, RE, Mackinac

Andrew Pomerville, TE, Lake Huron

Robert Sullivan, RE, Cincinnati

ⁱ A statement found to be subjective was removed here. (10/19/22)

ⁱⁱ A correction was made here, changing "Operations Committee" to "Coordinating Cabinet." (10/19/22)