

**Muskingum Valley Presbytery Administrative
Commission for
Reedurban Presbyterian Church**

FINAL REPORT

August 12, 2024



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Section I:

Formation and Purpose as provided by Muskingum Valley Presbytery.

Members:

Teaching Elders: Rev. Rami Almaqdasi, Rev. Bob Meyer (HR) Vice-Moderator, Rev. Tim Dyck, moderator.

Ruling Elders: RE Roger Sibert, clerk, RE Frank Walburg, RE Tabitha Williams, CRE

Presbytery Instructions:

- 1) You will need to elect a Moderator from the Teaching Elders and a Ruling Elder to serve as Clerk. All minutes from meetings whether via Zoom or in person will need to be forwarded to Alison Blondheim, MVP Stated Clerk, for MVP records.
- 2) You should have at least four (4) of you present for a quorum for your meetings.
- 3) You will be serving Reedurban Presbyterian Church as Administrative Commission with Original Jurisdiction to act in the authority of the Session. This comes at the request of the congregation of Reedurban Presbyterian Church.
- 4) You should gain a thorough understanding of conversations that were held in recent months with their recently resigned Session Elders and with their former pastors, Rev. Tom Houston and Rev. Kathryn Ophardt, MVP Committee on Ministry, and General Presbyter, Rev. Matt Skolnik.
- 5) You will need to learn about the dynamics within the church and should reach out to former pastor, Rev. Lynn Shetzer who served the congregation for six years for her experiences with the congregation.
- 6) After taking some time to meet and thoroughly explore the situation, you will make a recommendation to both the congregation and the presbytery as to what next steps should be taken for Reedurban Presbyterian Church.

Section 2: Methodology:

The Administrative Commission (AC) went about accomplishing its mission by meeting at Reedurban Presbyterian Church on November 30, 2023. At that meeting, officers were elected and the collection of data organized. The AC identified all the people to be interviewed and created two person teams to conduct the interviews either in person or by Zoom.

Subsequent to that meeting, the AC began by reviewing written records.¹ The AC facilitated a meeting with the congregation on January 28, 2024 at which it introduced itself and asked questions of the congregation. The meeting was announced from the pulpit and in

¹ Congregational Meeting Minutes for all of 2023, Session Minutes for 2023, Financial Records.

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written materials sent to the congregation. Invitations were issued for anyone regardless of their attendance at this meeting to submit comments in writing at any time. None were ever received. Subsequent interviews of interested parties occurred from February to May. Notes of each interview were shared with the committee as a whole.² The AC called a congregation meeting to survey the congregation about which of three options they favored. The survey indicated some of the recommendations (dissolving the deacon board and merging duties with Session, forming a nominating committee and electing a session) but not all. Summary results of the survey are included in Addendum A.

Section 3: Findings (These are listed in no particular order.)

- 1) There are areas of strength within the congregation. These include:
 - a. They are good stewards of their building.³
 - b. They have strong history of local outreach and mission although not as extensive as was offered prior to COVID.
 - c. They offer consistent fellowship opportunities
 - d. They are offering compassionate care of their members and friends.
 - e. They are offering Spirit-inspired worship.
- 2) RPC was hampered by power struggles between Session and Deacons. This appears to be exasperated by the lack of consistent pastoral leadership over the years. It is possible that the inherent model of the partnership (rotating pastoral leadership) inhibited discovery of this power struggle which by all accounts predated the partnership.
- 3) The congregation at RPC did not fully pay attention to the presentations regarding the partnership until they were experiencing it. At that point the congregation became engaged and opposed the changes that the partnership brought. This opposition was particularly centered in a few key people. It is possible that requiring a congregational vote to participate in the partnership might have prevented the failure of RPC to continue with the Partnership. However, it is also possible that this confrontation was inevitable and if this issue had not existed another would have resulted in more or less the same outcome.

² In person or Zoom interviews with the last session, the church secretary, members of the Deacon Board, previous Pastors (Lynn Shetzer, Tom Houston and Kathryn Ophardt and Mike Baker), Current Pulpit Supply Elder Lisa Machar. The Commission was unsuccessful in its attempts to interview Mark Armstrong as he has moved out of state.

³ The original report had reference to a regular Bible study. When this was presented to the congregation, it was clarified that there had not been any Bible study for two years due to lack of participation. The report is amended to reflect that.

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- 4) Session having considered its options resigned 'en masse' as they no longer felt that the congregation understood and/or followed the Presbyterian model of church government which states that Session is the governing council of any congregation.
- 5) At the congregational meeting at which Session resigned, an appeal was made for people to enter active service as an elder and form a new session. No one volunteered to serve.
- 6) There is substantial loyalty to the building rather than to the people who form the church. There is a strong belief in the congregation that RPC belongs to them, rather than understanding that any church is part of the body of Christ and derives its identity, mission, purpose and ability to be a church only to the degree with which it follows Jesus.
- 7) There is strong resistance to any change. An example of this is the opposition to an attempt to move the coffee time following worship to the narthex instead of the traditional location further down the hall.
- 8) Between November of 2021 and September of 2022, three donations were made to the church from one individual totaling \$65,000. The donor directed the financial secretary and the treasurer to use the money 'where most needed'.⁴ Those instructions were followed. The money was distributed this way \$35K went into savings, \$22.5K into the general fund and \$7.5K into the Deacons fund. Neither the treasurer nor the financial secretary seem to be aware that their actions essentially circumvented session's authority nor do they seem cognizant any donor can stipulate that how their donations were to be used. This contributed to the distrust within the congregation.
- 9) The survey of the congregation provides interesting information (See Appendix A at the end of the report). The survey was conducted by members of the AC at a called congregational meeting. The survey used ranked categories i.e. participants were asked to select their first, second and third choices. While the majority of those present clearly favored continuing as a congregation, there is a substantial minority that is ready to look at other options instead of continuing.

Section 4: Recommendations:

Overview:

This congregation is facing significant and potentially insurmountable challenges to its continued existence. The first is that of this writing there is no leadership consistent with being a Presbyterian Church i.e. there is no session. Like many other congregations, Reedurban

⁴ This paragraph has been changed from the original report to reflect an update from the congregational meeting of 8/11/24 objecting to the statement that the donor 'directed that session not be told of the donation.' This was strenuously denied by the financial secretary.

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Presbyterian has been in decline for several years in that as members leave the congregation, they are not replaced. The congregation has not chosen to utilize its savings and investments to sustain a full-time pastor for many years. There are hard feelings that will need some sort of resolution if the congregation is going to survive the foreseeable future. Furthermore, there are concerns that the congregation is approaching a time when it will lack the number of people necessary to sustain its ministry and function.

Something that should be made absolutely clear to any reader of this report is that there are no options available to the congregation that can occur without requiring changes on the part of the congregation. The degree to which the congregation embraces this truth will predict to a large degree how well the congregation functions into the future. Failure to accept this will significantly compromise the congregation's ability to function.

Specific Recommendations:

The AC would recommend to Presbytery that the congregation at RPC be given the opportunity to write their near future. This would be accomplished within the following framework. If the congregation is unable to complete these items below, that would be a clear indication that the congregation is unable to continue and that Presbytery should come alongside RPC in a supportive role as the congregation concludes its ministry. In order to show this, the following should occur.

- 1) That a congregational meeting be called for the following purposes.
 - a. Dissolve the board of deacons and assign those duties and responsibilities to session.
 - b. Amend the by-laws to reflect this change.
 - c. Add a statement to the by-laws affirming and reflecting Presbyterian Structure that Session is the governing body for the congregation and stating the times when congregational votes are in order.
 - d. Nominate and elect a nominating committee.
- 2) That the nominating committee provide a slate of officers to the congregation for their approval.
 - a. Session shall be comprised of at least three members but no more than six with staggered terms upon election (i.e. terms for one, two and three years so as to ensure that the orderly rotation of officers as provided by the Book of Order.)
- 3) The Congregation is strongly encouraged to promote revival and revitalization instead of merely surviving. For this to occur, the congregation as a whole must commit to a vision that encompasses a significant investment in ministry and the

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people to lead it. The congregation needs to see itself a whole rather than a collection of individuals.

- 4) The Congregation is encouraged to schedule and support intentional leadership training session(s) and conflict resolution through MVP. Active participation by the congregation in programs like the Presbytery's Mission Lab would give the congregation a framework to create and sustain growth.
- 5) If the congregation is unable to do the above, merging or closing is inevitable. Were the congregation to discern that RPC has concluded the ministry for which God called the congregation together, we believe there is no shame or failure in that.

Conclusion:

RPC was facing the end of its ministry for a variety of reasons before participating in the partnership was even contemplated. Session did what it is supposed to as being the spiritual leaders of the congregation. The participation in the partnership was an attempt to lead the congregation to make the necessary changes so the congregation would be able to expand its ministry and continue as a congregation. The attempts by Session to ensure congregational viability for the foreseeable future were met with resistance. There was a significant and strong group that wanted the forms and practices of the congregation to remain unaltered. This led to the resignation of all members of the session and the necessity for the formation of an Administrative Commission by the Presbytery as no one was willing to assume an overt leadership role.

After investing time and effort in assessing the situation and developing recommendations for the Presbytery and the congregation at RPC going forward, the AC has completed its mission. In making the recommendations it has to the congregation and Presbytery, the AC concluded that RPC should be given the opportunity to demonstrate that they can overcome the issues that led to AC's formation. It is an opportunity that will require cooperation and mutual regard from all members of RPC. Going forward the AC anticipates presenting this report first to the congregation so that it has time to consider the report and any conclusions it wishes to make to Presbytery when the report is presented to Presbytery.

It has been an honor and privilege to serve our Lord, our Presbytery and the congregation at RPC. It is in our deepest confidence in the work of the Spirit that we commend our sisters and brothers at RPC and their future together to the love and grace of God.

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Tim Dyck, Moderator

Rev. Bob Meyer, Vice-Moderator

Elder Roger Sibert, Clerk

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Elder Frank Walburg, Member
Rev. Rami Maqdasi, Member
Elder Tabitha Williams, Member

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Addendum A – RPC Congregational Survey & Results

Survey

1 Corinthians 12:12: *The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. (NLT)*

The Administrative Commission is requesting your input by ranking the three options below in the priority order that best represent your feelings for how Reedurban Presbyterian Church should move forward (1 = highest desire, 2 = next, 3 = lowest desire).

Reedurban Presbyterian Church

Advisory Survey

RANK (1, 2, 3)

A. Continue as a Presbyterian congregation. This would entail:

- a. Merge responsibilities of Deacons and Session into one board - Session**
- b. Form a nominating committee**
- c. Create slate of elder candidates**
- d. Elect a Session**

(Are you willing to serve?) YES NO

B. Seek a merger with another congregation.

C. End the church's ministry with gratitude and appreciation for the many ways God has used the church throughout the years.

Romans 15:13: *I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit. (NLT)*

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Survey Results

Ranking	Continue	Merge	Close	No Answer	Total
#1	11 (55%)	6 (30%)	3 (14%)		20
#2	5 (25%)	11 (55%)	0 (0%)	4 (20%)	20
#3	2 (10%)	2 (10%)	12 (60%)	4 (20%)	20

- Majority choice: #1 Continue
- Merging is 2nd option
- Closing is #1 for 3 people & the 3rd and last option for 12 people
- 35% voted to merge or close: do something different
- 85% voted to continue or merge (merge people are in previous count)
- In total 60% voted to accept closing (either as a first or third choice)
- Nobody listed closing as the only option: those who voted for closing as a first choice made other choices.