

AM Agenda Item 27. Report from the Covenant Executive Board on the Relational Work and Developments with Covenant Governing Bodies

Introduction

My name is Jon Bonkoski and I am a member of Emmanuel Covenant Church in Shoreview, Minnesota. I serve as the Chair of the Covenant Executive Board. With me today is, Cindy Wu, vice-secretary of the Covenant Executive Board and member of Mosaic Community Covenant Church in Sugar Land, TX. On behalf of the Covenant Executive Board, we come to fulfill a commitment the Covenant Executive Board made to the delegates of the 134th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

Background

At the 2019 Covenant Annual Meeting the delegates discerned matters pertaining to changes to the roster of Covenant churches and changes to the roster of Covenant clergy. At that time, the 134th Annual Meeting took final action to remove one congregation from the roster of Covenant churches and two pastors from the roster of Covenant clergy. In each instance, Annual Meeting actions were the culmination of processes outlined in Covenant governing documents including the Covenant's Constitution and Bylaws, The Rules for the Ordered Ministry, the Ministerium Constitution and Bylaws, those of the respective regional conferences, *Roberts Rules of Order* and adopted Standing Rules of Order, respectively. In the involuntary removal of a church from the congregational roster, three independent reviews are required, with the right to defense at each by the congregation. Those three reviews are carried out by the regional conference executive board, the Covenant executive board, and finally the Annual Meeting itself which alone has the final voice. In the involuntary removal of a clergy credential, three independent reviews are in order, with the right to defense at each by the pastor. Those three are the Board of the Ordered Ministry, the Covenant Ministerium Annual Meeting, and the Annual Meeting which alone has final voice.

Even in following governing documents, these actions are jarring in a relational denomination, and not without both relational and system stress.

Governance Processes

While each of the governing entities aforementioned has independence of action, these are interfacing processes, which may benefit from better common language and clarifications. For example, some have noted the prominence of *Roberts Rules of Order* language and process. For some, *Roberts Rules of Order* may not feel nuanced enough to capture Covenant ethos and so some may prefer to better portray more Covenant-specific language and processes.

Therefore, the Covenant Executive Board, in response to delegate sentiments expressed at the 2019 Annual Meeting, has encouraged the Ministerium Officers, the Board of the Ordered Ministry, Annual Meeting Officers, and the Executive Board itself to review their respective current processes with an eye towards enhancement and clarity. Each body's process review is underway, some farther than others, with some slowed by Covid and other factors. The Executive Board intends to convene an upcoming combined gathering of these entities with an eye towards more seamless processes and language where feasible. Relevant matters will be brought to the 2022 Annual Meeting for action as deemed necessary.

Leadership Concern

A separate aspect of governance was brought to the Executive Board subsequent to the Annual Meeting by two individuals expressing a shared concern. Their consideration concerned the use of influence by the president of the Covenant and the Executive Minister of Ordered Ministry and Develop Leaders.

The Executive Board, through assignment to its officers, has undertaken an extensive process to seriously engage the concerns. That process has invited in related governance leaders including Ministerium officers, board of Ordered Ministry Officers, Annual Meeting officers, the executive minister, and the president. A third-party organization was invited to independently review the concerns and to foster steps towards reconciliation. The executive board also offered all parties access to pastoral care and support including spiritual direction, counseling, and/or leadership resources that could contribute to one's individual and/or group development.

Through this process, the executive board has found:

- that trust in certain relationships was indeed broken, at times bilaterally, and remains in need of on-going attention;
- that though uncomfortably or awkwardly handled at points, the expression of differences in opinion and alternative approaches to action are within executive prerogative of the Constitution and Bylaws;
- that no recommendations were constrained by executive leadership action from being considered by appropriate bodies;
- that final decisions were made by the appropriate decision-making bodies based on arguments under consideration;
- that while differences of opinion persist among participants, parties have largely remained at the table taking steps towards interpersonal resolution.

Steps Forward

First, as mentioned, the Ministerium, Board of Ordered Ministry, Annual Meeting Officers, and the Covenant Executive Board are all underway to review and refine governance protocols regarding the contested removal of both congregations and pastors. We expect these matters to be addressed as needed at next year's Annual Meeting.

Second, parties are still engaged with interpersonal processes provided by the Covenant in hopes of increasing relational and working trust.

This has indeed been a trying time for the Covenant. But we are hopeful in finding our way forward together through renewed Covenant ethos. First, Biblically, then respectfully, redemptively, decently and in order all from a shared desire to go deeper in Christ and further in mission. We can all give testimony to how God has used the Covenant to shape our lives. We believe that as we collectively

stand in a humble posture, God's redemptive purposes even in times of stress will continue to shape us and make us more faithful in our life together in Christ.

On behalf of the Covenant Executive Board

Jon Bonkoski, chair

David Holder, vice-chair

Julie Persson, secretary

Cindy Wu, vice-secretary

Prayer

Dear Jesus,

You are the one who reconciles us not only to you, but to each other. It is because we all have embraced you as Lord and Savior. It is the great mystery that your servant the Apostle Paul revealed to the Church at Ephesus. And it is to our great gain. Help us to embrace the full meaning of that reconciling work even as we travail through this hurting time of broken relationships, disappointments, disagreements, and angst. We all, as the Church, desire to serve you more. We all want to be more like you. Help us to be more like you and, in turn, then be more like each other—of the same mind and heart. Help us to live into that great Church described by your servant Paul to the Ephesian Church—being completely humble and gentle; being patient, bearing with one another in love; making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. For we know that there is one body and one Spirit, just as we were called to one hope when we were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Help us to be that one church. In your name we pray. Amen

Mr. Moderator, this concludes our report to the 135th Covenant Annual Meeting.