

Transitional Pastor/Head of Staff's Report Highland Presbyterian Church Louisville, KY

Final Evaluation Prepared for the Session of Highland Presbyterian Church¹
By Kent Winters-Hazelton
August 17, 2022

“May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from God’s glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to God, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.” *Colossian 1:12-13*

Overview

The period of transition at Highland Presbyterian Church (September 1, 2020 –August 31, 2022) has been intentional, productive, and challenging. It began upon the retirement of the Rev. Dr. Cynthia Campbell, at the end of August 2020, following a healthy, positive, and successful nine-year tenure.

In addition to the regular interim tasks facing congregations in transition, this interim period was conducted under the restrictions brought about by the covid pandemic. This provided limited opportunities for an effective start-up for the work of the interim and had a detrimental impact on the overall goals of the transitional period. The opportunities for the new Transitional Pastor (TP) to meet members of the congregation and to learn their stories and hear their concerns were not available.

Furthermore, the church faced a long-standing personnel concern related to one of the associate ministers on the church staff. Following several months of review and efforts to improve performance, the Associate Pastor, the Rev. Lynda (“Doodle”) Harris, resigned her position, effective October 31, 2021. The resignation brought out into the open deep divisions among Highland (HPC) members with regards to the positive and negative impact of Rev. Harris’ tenure at the church. There is considerable work still to be done in helping the congregation find a unified path forward.

The concluding months of the transition focused on rebuilding the spirit of the church, providing support to committees and church staff, and setting a solid foundation for new pastoral leadership.

Accomplishments in the area of Administration, Program and Mission during this time of transition.

As Highland Presbyterian Church proceeded through the transition, it continued to be active and engaged in all aspects of the church’s ministry and in planning for a new era of ministry. As part of the regular tasks of this interim period, the members and staff of the congregation:

- provided weekly worship, initially online and then in a hybrid format;
- worked through the changing landscape of COVID-19, making necessary adjustments as the situation required;
- conducted a comprehensive mission study, with over 200 members participating through congregational surveys, in interactive online video group sessions with the consultant, and concluding with an in-person retreat with officers, members of the newly elected Pastor Nominating committee and the Mission Team, facilitated by the consultant;²
- welcomed new members even as it saw several members remove their membership; and

¹ An initial draft of this evaluation was prepared for the July meeting of the Personnel Committee at Highland.

² John W. Wimberly, a retired Presbyterian pastor, a consultant with the former Alban Institute and now with Congregational Consulting Group, served as the facilitator for the mission study.

- elected a Pastor Nominating Committee, whose work continues.

In addition to those primary congregational activities, Highland also experienced several new initiatives, areas of growth and achievements of that period of time.

- Following the easing of strict covid restrictions in March 2022, worship attendance (in-person and online) returned to match pre-covid numbers.
- Reestablished a positive, collegial and safe work environment for administrative, program and professional staff. Conducted an evaluation of the church's administrative structure, leading to changes in some staff responsibilities, and the dismissal of the Business Administrator.³
- Establishment of an Earth Care working group, which is moving HPC toward becoming a certified Earth Care Congregation in the PC(USA).
- Placement of an Electric Vehicle charging station in parking lot.
- Preparation of a Race Audit by members of the Race Equity Task Force, that reviewed past issues and actions of HPC concerning race.
- Conducted an Anti-Racism Workshop, led by consultant Kerry Connelly, with 25 participants.
- Adopting a statement on inclusivity.
- Entered into supportive relationship with Housing Partnership, Inc., using the HPC endowment to provide resources for housing for lower-income Black families in Louisville.
- Made acknowledgment of the original inhabitants of the land where Highland now meets to worship and service. This reflects the action of the 223rd General Assembly (2018), and was read at the beginning of the Annual meeting of the Congregation in 2021 and 2022.
- Rededicated the youth program meeting space as the Kevin and Kimberlee Burns Center for Youth Ministry.
- Established a new bell choir program
- Recognized Dr. Cynthia Campbell as Pastor Emerita.
- Redesigned and improved HPC website.
- Prepared plans for complete overhaul for exterior signage.
- Reduced the size of the Session, from 27 to 21 members.
- Reviewed membership rolls.
- Approved and supported a new worshipping community, Limen Place.
- Installed video screens in the sanctuary.

Goals for the Transitional Pastor at Highland Presbyterian Church:

1. To provide pastoral leadership to the congregation in the areas of in worship, administration, pastoral care, and education.
2. To work with the congregation, staff, and session through the Five Developmental Tasks of Interim Ministry,⁴ with an eye toward preparing the church for new pastoral leadership.
3. To serve as the Head of Staff and to lead the church's clergy, administration, and music staffs, and work on staff identity and cohesion.
4. To address new or incumbent issues that may impact new pastoral leadership.
5. To work with the Commission on Ministry (COM) of Mid-Kentucky Presbytery (MKP) in achieving its goals for the pastoral transition of Highland Presbyterian Church.

³ The incumbent Business Administrator acknowledged that his skills were not a good match for the position description. There were no suggestions of malfeasance in this dismissal.

⁴ The Developmental Tasks were included in the contract between the church and the TP/HOS. They are derived from the work of Loren Mead, who published the results of a study, titled "The Interim Pastor: A Neglected Role in Parish Development," in the mid-1970's. These tasks include: Discovering new identity; Coming to terms with history; Strengthening patterns of leadership; Strengthening denominational connections; and Preparing for new leadership.

The remaining portion of this evaluation will follow the outline of the goals for the transitional period.

1. To provide pastoral leadership.

- a. Served as Moderator of Session.
- b. Served at the Head of Staff, working closely with and providing oversight and support for the Associate Pastors, and music, program, and administrative staff.
- c. Provided stability and leadership during the period when church programming was shut-down due to Covid.
 - i. In this time, many of the administrative and pastoral staff worked from home, and most of the church's administrative planning was conducted by Zoom. (In the first 10 months of the transition, there were less than a dozen individual face-to-face meetings between the TP and other pastors.) This made team building and goal-setting processes difficult and had a negative impact on the cohesion and accomplishments during the first 12 - 16 months of the interim.
- d. Modeling a collegial style of pastoral leadership. The tradition at Highland is of a strong and dominant Head of Staff. The congregation has functioned effectively with such a clergy-centric style. Current trends in pastoral leadership encourage an interactive and collaborative model, which we have engaged in this time of transition.
- e. Committees regularly served: Property, Stewardship, Personnel, Worship and Spiritual Life, Congregational Nominating, Finance, and Investment; also served with the Race Equity Task Force, Reopening Task Force, and the Mission Study team.
- f. Provided quality worship experience and education opportunities via video during the period of covid restrictions and in person after May 2021.
- g. We have intentionally widened the array of preaching topics/texts to prepare for a new voice in the pulpit. These have included an introduction of the Narrative Gospel, and conducting intentional series of messages on topics including Psalm 23, the Gospel of John, the Letter to the Colossians. The preaching schedule also included several texts from the Hebrew Scripture.

2. Work with the congregation, staff, and session toward preparing the church for new pastoral leadership.

- a. Prepared updated reviews and evaluations for the Session: 1st Quarter (Jan. 2021), 1st year (August 2021), and in this final report. (These reports were also shared with the MKP staff and COM leadership.)
- b. Prepared monthly reports for the Personnel Committee (PC).
- c. Updated position descriptions for all staff.
- d. Worked closely with the PC and the COM in the review process of and attempt to seek professional improvements regarding Rev. Harris. [See separate section below, page 7]. The resignation of Rev. Harris lays the foundation for a new pastoral relationship unencumbered by staff tensions and disruptions.
- e. The church conducted a mission study in the spring of 2021, which, as noted above, had considerable input from the congregation.
 - i. The TP recruited members to serve on the planning team and facilitated the first few meetings until internal leadership emerged.
 - ii. The TP researched possible consultants and introduced the planning team to a nationally-known consultant, who led us through the process.
- f. Initiated a review with the PC of the administrative staff structure and proposed a redesign which was adopted. This resulted in the promotion of the Church Administrator.
- g. Set up a Transitional Support Team, recruiting four members of the congregation to help advise and support the TP through this transition. The Team only met twice. This was regrettable but also inevitable. Shortly after the second meeting, the Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) was presented to Rev. Harris. Since much of the information in the PIP was confidential, the TP felt it was not appropriate to share with the Team what was going on behind the scenes. One of the objectives of the Team would be to assist the congregation as it moved forward following the outcome of the

review of the former Associate Pastor. Discussing this issue with the Team would not have been appropriate at that time. Two members of the Transition Team were elected to the Pastor Nominating Committee.

- h. Co-lead Officers' training sessions for each incoming class of officers.
- i. Conducted an Officers' Retreat on the topic of "How to welcome a new pastor," drawing from the learnings of my own experience of entrance into Highland.
- j. Introduced the congregation to the use of video and visual aids in worship.

Within this area of preparing the congregation for new leadership, are significant concerns or shortfalls which suggest transitional work still incomplete.

- a. The loss of momentum on the mission study.
 - i. The first portion of the mission study drew to a close with the officers' retreat in May 2021, facilitated by John Wimberly, our consultant. The materials produced at that point were handed off to the newly elected Pastor Nominating Committee.
 - ii. The Mission Study team (MST) was prepared to continue to work on refining the goals and developing action steps. By the end of the summer, however, the congregation was absorbed in the process centering on the Associate Pastor. Following the resignation, half of the members of the MST stepped away from the project.
 - iii. The mission study needs to be updated and reshaped. Several of its descriptions of HPC and suggestions about potential ministries are not as accurate.
- b. There are a number of positions on the Session and Board of Deacons that are unfulfilled. The Congregational Nominating committee did a commendable job over the year, under difficult conditions, but were not able to produce a full slate for either board. (The CNC has been the most intentional, timely and enthusiastic I have worked with in the 14 churches I have served. I have appreciated their dedication to service.) I encouraged Alex Novak in April to have the committee take another run at finding officers, and he reported to me in late June that they had no one who was interested in serving at this time.
- c. There has been a concerning decrease in the church's stewardship.
 - i. In 2020, two of the largest annual contributors died, leaving a gap in the annual stewardship planning that remains.
 - ii. Several members did not pledge or decreased their pledge for 2022, some in reaction to the resignation of Rev. Harris, and some because of the generous severance she received.
 - iii. Considerable work could be done to prepare younger members to step into role of the financial for the ministry and mission of HPC.
 - iv. HPC has a tremendous blessing of the funds in its Endowment, which are used to sustain a level of ministry beyond the annual gifts of its members.
- d. Over the last two years, a number of ideas emerged from members, especially younger members, dealing with concerns about race and environment. The reaction from the session was not all together positive. The leadership of the congregation should be celebrating and rejoice that members have taken initiatives to connect Highland with some of the critical issues of younger generations. William Easum, a highly regarded church consultant wrote a provocative book with the intriguing title, "Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers," in which he argued for "permission-giving churches," that encourage new ideas to emerge. Permission-giving churches recognize that all members of a church are called to ministry, but not necessarily to church committees. Meanwhile, church committees should not seek to stifle the movement of the spirit or discourage younger and newer members from expressing their interests, concerns, and innovations.
- e. The events of the past two years have broken a bond of trust within the session. Two examples: the Personnel Committee is made up of members who care deeply for this church, and included many who are leaders in human resources or the legal field of employment law. Very few churches are privileged to have that type of expertise serving on the congregation's personnel committee. They have been given the not-always-easy task of oversight of the staff of Highland. When they brought concerns to the session about one of the Associate Pastors, the session *as a whole* did not trust their

work, and voted to add others to their responsibility who would have held a more positive view of the associate pastors work. A second example was the resistance to the Earth Care Team's recommendation for putting electric vehicle charges in the parking lot. The session doesn't question the choice of curriculum for Sunday school, or the way the Worship and Spiritual Life committee lines out the order of Sunday worship, but they did the recommendation from the Earth Care Team. Why? A healthy and vital congregation, in this day and age and at a time when churches have such a hard time succeeding, needs to be open to the movement of the Spirit who speak to and from a new age of believers. Work at rebuilding that trust.

3. To provide leadership to church's staff.

- a. Upon arrival, the TP met individually with executive level members of the HPC staff (pastors, music director, business administrator, director of the Weekday School), to help assess the current situation at HPC.
- b. Communicated to the Associate Pastors the vision of a collegial framework for ministry and promised to work with them as equal partners in the ministry of HPC.
- c. Facilitated the weekly staff meetings and the pastoral staff meetings.
- d. Prepared two team building retreats in November 2020 and in December 2021. The TP recruited Rev. Peggy Hinds, former member of the MKP executive staff to serve as facilitator.
- e. Affirmed the quality of work and skill of the Communications Director who was promoted to the role of Church Administrator. Also promoted was the Administrative Assistant.
- f. Held regular one-on-one conversation with key senior staff members, working on planning, oversight, and strategy.
- g. Prior to the start of the transition, the former Associate Pastor said to at least two members of HPC that she "would give the interim 30 days to start to straighten out the church," otherwise she would look to move to a new position.
- h. After an early confrontation with Rev. Harris (in Sept. 2020, resulting in the first incident report, which was reported immediately to PC), she indicated that she would be open to the TP helping her when she "messed up." The TP agreed to do so. Over the course of the next nine months, such oversight conversations did occur.
- i. Recommended that the church invest in their staff by providing coaching for them during the post-resignation era and as the new pastor comes on board. There is a general understanding that such support will occur as part of the integration of the new pastor into the service and teamwork of the staff.
- j. Whenever possible, the TP attempted to publicly lift up the quality of service of HPC's staff.

4. To address new or incumbent issues that may impact new pastoral leadership.

- a. The staff and leadership continually adjusted to the changing covid protocols.
- b. The congregation responded to issues of race, and in particular concerns surrounding the death of Breonna Taylor.
- c. Through the mission study, a goal emerged to be more intentional in reaching out to the neighborhood west of Bardstown Road.
- d. The difficult, but necessary work of addressing the hostile work and congregational environment brought about by the former Associate Pastor was dealt with. The patterns of behavior had been long-standing, and there was no evidence that she would commit to a changed behavior once a new pastor was in place. Therefore, the continuation of her position on the church staff would have had a detrimental impact on the new pastor's entrance, management of staff, effectiveness in serving the whole congregation, and length of tenure.
- e. Beyond question, this was the most essential service to Highland in the period of transition.

5. To work with the MKP/COM in achieving goals of this transitional period.

- a. Highland has historically had very good relations with Mid-Kentucky Presbytery. The church is one of the key supporters of MKP in terms of financial support and the members of HPC who serve on varied committees.
- b. The positions taken by the COM *as a whole*, and by the General Presbyter (GP), regarding the issues surrounding the former Associate Pastor, has placed a strain on that relationship.⁵
- c. The TP felt that one of the primary responsibilities in this interim period lay in helping the MKP staff and COM to understand the depth of the problem that members of the HPC staff and congregation had faced regarding Rev. Harris. His role further was to persuade COM to support the HPC leadership and other members of the church staff, in dealing with a destructive staff situation. On this issue, the TP failed.
 - i. The issues concerning Rev. Harris have caused considerable damage to the larger life of HPC and the prospects of a positive and healthy relationship between the HPC congregation and its new pastor.
 - ii. COM's response to the concerns raised about Rev. Harris has brought about division between the active leadership of HPC and the MKP staff and COM membership. Without future conversation and mutual understanding of what transpired at HPC in the past 27 months, there will be continuing negative impact on future trust between those bodies.
 - iii. The inability on the part of the TP to convey the depth of the problem to the COM is and will remain the deepest regret and sorrow of his as this call reaches its conclusion.
- d. The TP has had a long history of working with Commissions (or Committees) on Ministry in the eight previous presbyteries that he has served.⁶ He has been accustomed to the full support of the COM, and the presbytery's executives in working on some of the most difficult interim situations that congregations face. The TP did not have that support from the GP or the COM *at large* in this call, and that has made this service exceedingly difficult.
 - i. In the TP's experience, when a PC comes to the presbytery to register a concern about a pastor's performance or relationship with the larger congregation, the GP or the COM would appoint a liaison or small task force to start getting information *from all parties*.
 - ii. Members of the Personnel Committee reported their concerns to the GP in May of 2020.⁷ Subsequent communications about the issues were made by the PC in November 2020, January 2021 (by the TP), March 2021 (in the issuance of the PIP), and April 2021.
 - iii. A Task Force of COM was appointed in March 2021, with a directive to meet with the TP. However, no contact initiated by the COM or the Task Force was made with him until July. In the in-between time, he made at least five requests to the GP or COM chair, inquiring why the Task Force had not begun its work. Eventually, he was informed that the Task Force was disbanded "because HPC did not want them involved." This was done without any communication or discussion with the PC, the Clerk of Session of HPC, or the TP. It did not reflect the intentions of the PC or TP.
- e. One example illustrates the lack of balance from the COM in regard to Rev. Harris.
 - i. After the PIP was presented to Rev. Harris in Feb. 2021, she requested a meeting with the full COM (without the knowledge of the PC), in which she outline her complaints about the PC and her response to the PIP.
 - ii. Following her presentation, the COM took action in support of Rev. Harris without making any attempt to determine the validity of her claims or to discuss the basis for the issuance of

⁵ The initial liaison serving HPC, David Maxwell, and the current liaison (and most recent moderator of COM), Joel Weibel were outstanding exceptions to this general observation. Joel, in particular, was often the lone vote on the COM acting in favor of the concerns or requests of the PC in regard to the former Associate. Members of the Task Force, who were brought on late in the conflict, gradually became important supporters of a process to remove Rev. Harris.

⁶ The TP has served as the chair of the COM of National Capital Presbytery (Washington, D.C. metro area) for two years, and as chair for two years of its counseling divisions (working with churches in some degree of conflict).

⁷ The TP's in-person interview took place July 1, 2020.

- the PIP by the PC. In response to her allegations, the COM ruled that “personnel committee shall not require Reverend Harris to meet alone with Kent Winters-Hazelton...”⁸
- iii. This action was based on unsubstantiated and unverified information supplied to the COM by Rev. Harris. The COM made no effort – and to this day has not made any effort – to speak with the PC or the TP about the apparent charge of abuse logged against the TP.⁹ Nor has the GP, or the COM, responded to the series of questions about process raised by the TP in response to the commission’s communique.¹⁰
 - iv. Nonetheless, that action set the table for the contentious relationship that developed between the PC, the leadership of HPC, and the TP.

Analysis: A Perspective on the Key Incident:

A significant portion of the interim period at Highland was directed toward the issues presented by Rev. Harris. As noted above, concern about her work at Highland were long standing, and were set long before the TP was engaged in conversation with the search committee. Indeed, a Performance Improvement Plan was issued to Rev. Harris in November 2010, signed by Dr. Fair and James Giesel. Furthermore, the concerns were made known to the TP (and his primary references) prior to the start of this interim. These sources extended beyond members of the search committee. Those who provide the TP with background on Highland labeled the staff relationship here as “toxic” and “hostile.”

In the judgment of the TP, Rev. Harris had many excellent gifts for ministry, which were reflected in the quality and popularity of the programs for children and youth at HPC. She was gifted, charismatic, creative, engaged, and dedicated. Programs under her auspice, for the most part, flourished. Her connection with guests and visitors brought many new members and families into the church community.

But that was not the complete picture. Rev. Harris also had a negative impact on the life and ministry of Highland. She was myopic, immature, domineering, and divisive. Evidence for this conclusion comes from multiple sources and the TP’s personal experience. The TP has had extensive experience serving as a Head of Staff, with 11 Associate Pastors (9 women, 2 men, 3 LBGTQ). In over 25 years serving in multiple staff situations, the TP had never had to write up an incident report on an Associate Pastor before. In less than a year, he issued four such reports regarding the former Associate Pastor, with two other incident reports coming from other staff members.

Two stories, brought to my attention after the resignation, demonstrate the problems posed by Rev. Harris’ style of ministry. Following the completion of the confirmation course, Rev. Harris did not allow one student to be confirmed. Hearing this stunned the TP. This is not the Associate Pastor’s call to make. Nonetheless, the student and his mother have not been part of Highland’s worshipping community for several years. The second and similar story, involve a new member of the youth program who was excited to hear about the summer trip to Montreat. Rev. Harris told her she hadn’t been at enough of the youth meetings to qualify to go. Soon thereafter, the youth stopped going to youth group and church.

Upon his arrival, the TP interview 23 elders. These interviews reflected the division within the congregation. The interviews did not include a question about any member of the HPC staff, yet 11 elders volunteered their view about Rev. Harris, six giving an enthusiastic positive endorsement and five pointing to issues that have divided the congregation.

Members of the HPC staff have shared their discomfort working with Rev. Harris. One member noted that when approaching the doors to the office (from the Fellowship Hall), if they would see the door to Rev. Harris’ office open through the narrow opening between the doors, they would feel a knot in their stomach.

⁸ Communication to Cynthia Welch and Kent Winters-Hazelton, from Joel Weibel, Moderator of MKP COM, March 23, 2021.

⁹ This related to the incident, which took place on September 24, 2020, where Rev. Harris sent an email to several HPC staff members inferring that the TP was racist. This incident was immediately brought to the attention of the PC moderator.

¹⁰ Email communication to John Odom, and Joel Weibel, March 24 and March 26, 2021. Rev. Weible acknowledge receipt of the emails and expressed his initial concern about the presentation of Rev. Harris before the COM.

So what happened in the process leading up to and following Rev. Harris' resignation?

The steps taken from September 2020 through October 2021, were carried out in conjunction with the Mid-Kentucky Presbytery staff and Commission on Ministry, and specifically the counsel of the Stated Clerk of the presbytery. The steps taken by the Personnel Committee were in accord with the *Book of Order* and the Rules of Discipline of the Presbyterian Church. The COM liaison was part of the process from its inception.

1. A Performance Improvement Plan was prepared by the Personnel Committee and presented to Rev. Harris on February 19, 2021. The TP's contribution to the PIP was limited to editorial suggestions.
2. A review committee was set up that sought to assist Rev. Harris in meeting the goals for improvement outlined in the PIP. This review committee was made up of members of the COM (including a liaison for Rev. Harris), representatives from the Personnel Committee, and the Transitional Pastor. This review committee met with Rev. Harris approximately seven times from March to July 2021.
3. While Rev. Harris was under review, she was subject to three incident reports regarding unprofessional behavior toward other members of the HPC staff. These incidents were reported to the PC. Following one incident, the TP contacted the Stated Clerk of MKP to determine whether he could suspend Rev. Harris for a determinant period of time. The Stated Clerk advised in the negative.
4. The COM appointed a Task Force in March 2021 to work with the TP toward resolving the issues with Rev. Harris. When the Task Force failed to follow through on its proposed action, the TP pressed the MKP leadership to encourage, direct or compel the Task Force to work with HPC leadership and the TP in dealing with Rev. Harris. Five months later, the Task Force had their first meeting with the TP, and two months later, they finally met with other HPC staff.
5. The TP continued to keep the MKP staff and COM leadership informed on the status of the evaluation of Rev. Harris and her performance as an installed pastor of the congregation. In June of 2021, the COM liaison asked the TP whether the relationship with Rev. Harris was "salvageable" or if it was "irreconcilable"? The response was:
 - a) Rev. Harris did not acknowledge the authority of the PC to issue the Performance Improvement Plan nor that she had done anything to bring about a PIP,
 - b) did not engage in any meaningful way in the process over the next seven months with the review committee, and
 - c) made no acknowledgement of the need for or commitment to improve her personnel behavior.
6. In the TP's view, had the COM acted in a timely and balanced manner, the issue regarding Rev. Harris may have reached a resolution in the spring of 2021, with considerably less damage to the Highland church community.
7. An email trail suggests that Rev. Harris breached the confidentiality of the Session, by sharing with some of the adult advisors at Montreat in June 2021 about the discussions which were held in executive session. Following that retreat, the chair of personnel, the TP, the General Presbytery, and a member of the Task Force (who had not been identified to the session) received at least four emails, very similar in substance, raising concerns that Rev. Harris was almost fired early in February (when the PIP was issued), and expressing support for her.¹¹
8. The TP did not participate in the discussions and negotiations leading to Rev. Harris's resignation.
9. Following the resignation, the TP (working with Rev. McCarty) made arrangements for small group conversations among church members with Rev. Joe Phelps and Erin Mires.

Churches may at times overlook the critical characteristics of a pastor because their gifts for ministry which benefit the overall ministry of the church, in terms of popular programming, the numbers of people participating, and the positive image it projects for the church. In doing so, churches may cause greater harm in the long run.

¹¹ These emails, including the original with a wide distribution list containing the information in the follow up emails, was shared with the TP in July 2021, and is included in the file on correspondence and activities regarding Rev. Harris, which has been given to the COM.

Upon her departure, Rev. Harris continued to meet with members of Highland, in violation to the Code of Ethics for clergy in MKP. These violations, with pictures from Facebook postings, were reported to COM. To our knowledge, the COM took no action toward discipline for Rev. Harris.

Conclusion:

This period of transition at Highland Presbyterian Church has been productive even in the light of a very divisive and challenging conflict surrounding the former Associate Pastor.

As noted above, the issues surrounding the former Associate Pastor were apparent at HPC long-before the period of transition.¹² In accepting this call, the Transitional Pastor understood that the issue needed to be confronted and resolved during his tenure at Highland. This meant either a substantive change in attitude on the part of Rev. Harris with a commitment to work collegially with staff and congregation members, or in the termination of her call. The work that was required to resolve this issue absorbed considerable time, energy, and emotion by all the parties, and adversely impacted the ability of the Transitional Pastor, the HPC staff, and the congregation to do some of the key work of transition in preparation for the call of a new pastor.

The Transitional Pastor firmly believes that after 24 months in the position, he has become part of the structure, and to some within the congregation, an obstacle to its prospects of reconciliation. With the conclusion of the contract, he will step aside effective August 31, 2022.

He wishes to express the greatest appreciation to the members of the HPC staff who have wrestled with the issues of this transition, who have provided insight, background, wisdom, and support to him for the past 24 months: the Rev. Megan McCarty, Dr. Vini Frizzo, Rob Miller, the Rev. Charles Brockwell, Amy Fitzgerald, and Kathleen Poole. Without their active participation, what successes that have been accomplished at HPC during this time of transition would not have been possible.

The Transitional Pastor acknowledges that his patience was not apparent as often as it ought to have been, but that he sought to serve Highland Presbyterian Church in full faith, to the best of his abilities, and in accord with his ordination vow to “preserve the peace and unity of the church.”

In the opening prayer of the Letter to the Colossians, the writer reminds the reader of the strength of the Holy One, which empowers us to endure the trials of life – and the trials of the church – with patience, and as we are able to do so, to give thanks joyfully to our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

Soli Deo Gloria.

¹² A previous PIP was issued to Rev. Harris in October 2010, during the tenure of the Rev. Dr. Fairfax Fair.