

Report from the Operations Team
September 2022

The Operations Team has been working on the proposed budget for 2023, as well as starting the process of searching for a temporary Head of Staff. In addition, The Operations Team worked with the Trustees to finalize the termination of the relationship with Dr. Flo Barbee-Watkins in June.

When Dr. Flo was approved by Presbytery as Transitional General Presbyter in 2020, the the purpose originally proposed for a TGP stated: "The purpose of this position is to lead the Presbytery of Detroit through a process of healing and discernment such that the at the end of the contract period, the presbytery is healthier, better connected and has a clear sense of its corporate mission." Unfortunately, after Dr. Flo's unexpected departure, our Presbytery remained fractured and distrustful, perhaps even to a greater extent than it had been two years earlier.

There is no use assigning blame for what happened. We are all trying our best to serve God and this Presbytery, and most of us are unpaid servants. We have an opportunity here and now to come together and all to strive both for greater transparency and greater trust. In that interest, and as Chair of Operations, I want to share with you a little more detail about how the separation took place. This is so that all of us in this Presbytery, myself included, can think about how we can improve going forward in the best interest of everyone.

The Operations team learned, as so many did, about Dr. Flo's departure through social media, just days before the Presbytery meeting. The day after Dr. Flo Barbee-Watkins' new position was announced via social media, the Operations Team received a letter of resignation that they were asked to keep confidential. In that letter, a proposed end date was given, and a request was made to honor any unused vacation and sick time. Other issues were also brought forth in the letter, and because those issues may have caused pain and divisiveness within the Presbytery as well as the fact that some issues involving the Presbytery, its staff, and Dr. Barbee-Watkins, were, and continue to be under review by a Synod commission, the Operations Team discussed and then recommended to the Presbytery that the relationship with Dr. Barbee-Watkins end immediately following the Presbytery vote so that healing could begin. Upon reading of the by-laws and the policies of the Presbytery, Operations believed that a separation agreement would then be discussed with Dr. Barbee-Watkins, considering both her requests for the terms of termination of the relationship as well as the best interests of the Presbytery. The Operations Team met several times to discuss these issues and to come up with a proposal that would be in the best interest of the Presbytery. Trustees, as the entity with the authority to contractually bind the Presbytery were consulted, as well as the Stated Clerk. The Synod was also contacted for advice mostly on procedure, and to ensure that nothing in the agreement would interfere with the issues that are currently being investigated by the Synod commission.

After evaluating the issues that were brought forth in the resignation letter, Operations, Trustees, and the Stated Clerk sought legal advice to ensure that the separation agreement was fair and justified, and that the Presbytery would be protected from any potential claims against it. A cost-benefit analysis was done to determine what the worst-case scenario might be and attempt to negotiate an agreement that would best protect the interests of the Presbytery. The employment attorney offered an extremely reduced fee and was retained to draft the separation agreement as well as to negotiate with Dr. Barbee-Watkins. Dr. Barbee-Watkins accepted the offer and signed the separation agreement and release. It became effective July 5, 2022. Both the Operations Team and the Trustees reviewed the final Separation Agreement and were unanimously in agreement that the cost of the separation package was worth the protection that the Presbytery received in return.

The total separation package totaled approximately \$10,000. In return, Dr. Barbee-Watkins signed a release of any and all possible claims she might have against the Presbytery both at the present time and in the future, and she also agreed that she would not speak disparagingly about the Presbytery of Detroit. The amount paid was well within the Operations Budget for 2022, and thus, no motion to amend the budget was required. In fact, the Operations team will be significantly under budget for the 2022 fiscal year. In addition, the teams and committees involved agreed that the amount paid would most likely be significantly less than the cost to the Presbytery should any action or claim be raised in the future, and thus decided that payment of this amount minimized the potential future costs to the Presbytery.

The goal of those involved in the separation package was to minimize the risk to the Presbytery and to attempt to de-escalate rather than escalate conflict. In personnel matters, there is an inherent need for confidentiality, as in legal processes. However, the Presbytery feels the need for greater transparency and I hear that too. I hope all of us can hear and receive feedback about how to do this in the future, with both trust and transparency as goals.

Truly,

Suzanne Lewand, Chair of Presbytery Operations