Report of Administrative Commission for the Fleming Island Presbyterian Church
Ben Samuels, Moderator
April 26, 2016

On December 8, 2015, upon the recommendation of the Committee on Ministry (COM), the presbytery established an administrative commission to visit the Fleming Island Presbyterian Church and to inquire into and settle difficulties therein (G-3.0109b5 of the Book of Order).

The presbytery empowered the Moderator of the Presbytery, the Moderator of the Committee on Ministry, and the Stated Clerk to name the commission. The commissioners named as reported to the presbytery at its 2016 Winter Stated Meeting are: Mary Coxe (RE – Riverside), Craig Davies (TE – Honorably Retired), Carol DiGiusto (TE – Lake Shore), Mac Heavener (RE – Memorial), Marjorie Phillips (RE – Orange Park), Ben Samuels (RE – South Jacksonville), Sheryl Sumlin-Walker (TE – Trinity/Halifax Health and Hospice), and Jeff Welch (TE – Dunnellon).

On December 8, the presbytery gave the commission specific authority to:

- Convene the session and any other subsidiary entities in the congregation;
- Consult with and/or engage the services of presbytery committees or staff, and to retain legal counsel or other outside assistance;
- Dissolve the session of the church, if, after a full opportunity to be heard has been accorded to the session, the commission concludes that the session is unable or unwilling to manage wisely its affairs, and to assume original jurisdiction of the existing session (G-3.0303e);
- Place the pastor on administrative leave with pay for such time as it deems necessary, dissolve the pastoral relationship pursuant to the processes and requirements of G-2.09, or take any other action with respect to the pastoral relationship that the presbytery may take in consultation with the session and the congregation; and
- Take such other actions as may be necessary to bring healing and stability to the church.

As of April 21, the commission has met more than fifteen times. It met two times initially to review its charge and to elect a moderator (Ben Samuels) and a clerk (Mary Coxe).
It reviewed the work of the Crisis Response Team of the Committee on Ministry as well as the work of a prior Crisis Response Team that visited the session during the year 2012 after the session provided notice that it was in discernment about its affiliation with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A). It reviewed the history of the new church development. The Administration and Finance Committee of the presbytery provided information concerning the session’s first notice to the presbytery in October, 2015, that it may need assistance paying its $9,287.26 mortgage payment, which the presbytery guarantees. (The presbytery also pays $4,494.66 per year in mortgage payments on the property occupied by the church.)

On January 24, 2016, the commission met with the session. It explained the process leading to the formation of the commission, provided a copy of the charge, heard from the session about a number of issues, and asked for questions and comments. A plan was made to offer time for any member of the congregation to meet with members of the commission to provide input and voice any concerns. Two days later, the commission consulted with Pastor Weldon. On Sunday, January 31, three members of the commission attended worship and spoke with the congregation about the charge given to the commission. That afternoon, members of the commission met with the session.

During February, the commission scheduled congregational meeting sessions (in small groups) on four different days (weeknights and Sunday afternoon). More than 70 individuals signed up to meet with commission members.

The commission determined that the call between the Fleming Island church and Pastor Weldon to the church should be dissolved to bring healing and stability to the church. On March 1, two members of the commission and Steve Benz met with Pastor Weldon and provided the terms of a proposed voluntary dissolution for his review and consideration. The pastor was provided time to review and consider the proposed voluntary dissolution. When the pastor did not decide to move forward positively or negatively with a voluntary resignation at that time and was unable to provide a time frame for when he could make a decision, the commission met and determined that it would proceed with the process for involuntary dissolution if necessary. The consultations that had taken place indicated that “the church’s mission under the Word imperatively demand[ed]” dissolution (G-2.0904). Before making its decision final, the commission made plans to meet with Pastor Weldon and with the session on March 15. A congregational meeting for consideration of the matter would be held on April 3.
On March 15, the commission met with the pastor and the session. A letter giving notice and listing items of significant concern was shared with the pastor prior to the meeting with the session. During the discussion, in which Pastor Weldon was represented by an attorney, Pastor Weldon communicated his request for voluntary dissolution of his call. The commission clarified the terms of dissolution that would be acceptable to the presbytery, subject to the concurrence of the congregation as required in the constitution. These terms included continued compensation and benefits for six months (at a previous higher compensation level) plus four weeks’ vacation. The matter was discussed with the session. The session voted to call a congregational meeting on April 3 so that Pastor Weldon’s request for dissolution could be presented. Following that meeting, the clerk of session and the church bookkeeper resigned (effective March 31).

On March 21, the commission met to discuss the April 3 meeting, which would be moderated by Pastor Bill Hoff (associate pastor at the Riverside church). The commission agreed to continue health coverage from the end of the continued compensation period to the end of 2016 in response to a personal request from Pastor Weldon’s wife, Jennifer Weldon. This would ensure their health care coverage until her next open enrollment period began.

Pastor Weldon did not request dissolution on the terms presented by the administrative commission, which included an agreement not to engage in congregational ministry in a particular area and period of time. On April 1, the commission convened again and received Pastor Weldon’s letter requesting dismissal of his call as of April 30 and including April 3 as his last day in the pulpit. The dissolution terms read:

“Doctor Jim Weldon hereby resigns as the Pastor of the Fleming Island Presbyterian Church and seeks dissolution of his Call to Fleming Island Presbyterian Church (USA) at the called congregational meeting on Sunday, April 3, 2016, in accordance with the Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Dr. Weldon’s last Sunday in the pulpit of Fleming Island Presbyterian Church (USA) will be April 3, 2016, followed by four (4) weeks of vacation, making the dissolution effective April 30, 2016.”

The congregational meeting was held on April 3 at 11:30 a.m. At the close of the worship service, Pastor Weldon and almost all of the church members worshipping that day left the property for a barbeque. A quorum (20 persons) was not present. The dissolution request/terms were read to those present. Those present were invited to share their comments and
concerns, and an advisory vote was taken (7 in favor of concurring with the request to dissolve the call, and 3 against).

The commission determined that another congregational meeting would have to be held, and it was noticed for April 17 (with the concurrence of the session). The meeting was held immediately after the 10:00 a.m. worship service. The dissolution request/terms were read to the congregation. The congregation voted not to concur with the request for dissolution by a vote of 30 to 27 (by confidential written ballot). It then proceeded to elect four “commissioners” from the congregation pursuant to G-2.092, which provides that “If the congregation does not concur, the presbytery shall hear from the congregation, through its elected commissioners, the reasons why the presbytery should not dissolve the pastoral relationship.” The congregation elected two to represent the majority view and two to represent the minority view. At the time of the writing of this report, the meeting with the congregational representatives has not yet occurred.

On April 21, after hearing a report that Pastor Weldon may be engaging in work that has not been approved by the presbytery or submitted for approval (some involvement in the nonprofit known as the “Fleming Island Faithful” that has met in the home of the former clerk of session), the administrative commission referred the matter to the Committee on Ministry for follow-up.

In addition to the actions described above, the commission has engaged a temporary supply pastor through May 3 at the expense of the presbytery (Pastor Tom Borland), attended session meetings, appointed moderators for session and congregational meetings, and agreed that the presbytery will loan funds to the congregation to pay the mortgage and other bills for the time being. Members of the commission have participated in worship services both before and after Pastor Weldon’s last day in the pulpit.