

ANNUAL MEETING OF THE CONGREGATION

FEBRUARY 21, 2021

A motion is made to approve the following:

Amending the By-Laws of the Congregation:

Under By-Law 11 entitled “The Session,” change the second sentence to read as follows: The number of elders in active service shall not exceed seventeen (17) nor be less than eleven (11), as determined from time to time by the Session or by the congregation.”^[L.C1]

The motion reflects a change in the size of Session as the size of the congregation has changed since the By-Laws were first adopted in 1996. Membership in 1996 was 2,429 (source 1/1997 minutes) and 972 currently—as reported in the January 2021 minutes.

Furthermore, the motion is consistent with previous changes made to the size of the Boards of the church, such as the reduction in the size of the Board of Deacons in 2009.

The motion seeks a range in the number of elders in active service that enables the Session to continue to fulfill its constitutional responsibilities as stated in the *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church (USA), specifically G-3.0201, and allows for flexibility in the event of changes that may arise over time in the mission and ministry of the church.

Rationale for Change: See attached White Paper below.

Dear Members of First Pres,

Last year, we participated in the Congregational Assessment Tool (the CAT Survey) to gather feedback and capture the current state of health of First Pres. If you read [the executive summary](#) or attended the congregational discussion held by our consultant, Susan Czologosz, who helped us interpret the results of the survey, you learned that, “*Overall, we are a strong, thriving congregation.*” Our community is deeply committed to serving God and loving our neighbors through service.

Session has contemplated the feedback, both positive and negative, and has discussed the various elements within our purview. Now we come to you with a request that requires congregational approval. We would like to change the size of Session to more effectively deliver our mission.

On behalf of Session, I would like to take this opportunity to share context for that request. In the executive summary, Susan Czologosz said:

“Now is the time for further conversation and strategic action around what this data is telling us and to what God is calling us in the next chapter of our life in ministry together. To become self-satisfied, is to risk decline. If our mission as a congregation is still compelling, what is the vision for how we will live this mission in the coming years? We have much to celebrate and to be thankful for; and we are left with some important things to ponder and act upon.”

We believe our mission to be followers of Jesus in a Matthew 25 congregation is still compelling. The question becomes how do we live that mission and take action? We honor the work that has come before us and the foundation that has been laid, but we don’t think the current structure and approach to Session helps us create and manage a plan for our future. We are not “self-satisfied” and would like to shift our routines

to a collective focus on the future; one that leverages our strengths, addresses our opportunities, and is in tune with our congregation.

Reducing the size of Session will facilitate richer conversations that can focus on our future and help to better navigate challenges. The current size of Session is simply too large to have constructive, in-depth conversations, reach decisions and act.

Session is currently determined by the number of church committees. There are 11 committees and, with some exceptions, there are usually 2 elders per committee. This means that each Session meeting has approximately 25 people in attendance, including the pastors. We meet once per month for 2-3 hours, allowing each elder to focus on reporting “their piece” of Session, which is their committee.

This model has served us well for many years, but there is little time for the Session to have discussions and make decisions about that future. As a result, that work often falls to pastoral leadership, which was also referenced in the CAT survey assessment as not sustainable. This change is an opportunity to engage the membership of our church in different ways.

The recommendation from Susan Czologosz and this subcommittee is for our elders to be focused on vision and strategy rather than leading committees. Practically, this means that elders will no longer be required to chair committees. Some committee chairs will be drawn from the membership of the congregation, giving them more time to plan, execute and enhance their committee work as they will not have to dedicate time to Session meetings. Pastors and staff will continue to remain as liaisons to the church committees. Likewise, the Session will become more focused on setting the direction of the church and communicating that direction to the committees who can focus on executing that direction.

Our current bylaws set the number on Session to range from as few as 21 to as many as 30. We would like to change that range to 11 - 17.

It may be helpful to know that this is not an unusual action to take, for other churches or for us. We have altered the size of Session before and it is simply time to do it again. What we propose is clearly within the guidelines of the Book of Order and our congregational bylaws.

If approved, Session's next step is to build a comprehensive transition plan. Our goal is to have that plan completed by summer so that we can complete the transition by the end of 2021. This would allow the Nominating Committee to create the next slate of elders with the new structure in mind so we can begin with the new size in 2022.

We wanted to provide this as a preview to the presentation at the Annual Meeting so that you have time to reflect and consider this proposal. The congregation will have the opportunity to ask questions at the Annual Meeting. However, if you have any questions or would like to discuss this change with any of our current Session members before the meeting, please feel free to reach out to the elders or any member of the Vision and Strategy Committee at vision@firstpresah.org.

Mario Alberico (chair), Cynthia Hiskes, Laura Carlson, Bob Churchill, Tom Pardo, Rev. Alex Lang (ex officio)

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Why are we doing this?

- a. Primarily, we are recommending this in response to the congregational survey and the advice from the consultant who facilitated the survey. The survey feedback included improving the transparency of governance, shifting to a more congregational centric church in order to continue to thrive and increasing the overall engagement of members. These changes will also make us a more functional body who can respond more quickly and effectively to the needs of the congregation and our mission. We think these are essential elements for a strong future.

2. Is there an ‘optimal’ size that Session wants to get to and how will we get there?

- a. If approved, the size of Session could range between 11 and 17 members. The exact size of Session is something the elders will be discussing in the coming months. The final number will depend on several factors: 1) the scope of work planned over the next five to ten years, 2) the degree of participation from the congregation, and 3) other logistical challenges that will be identified during the transitional stages. The process by which the size reduction occurs will also be delineated as we begin the transitional stage. We are considering a reduction in the size of the 2022 incoming class along with the possibility of asking current Session members if any want to end their term early.

3. What is the term of the Session members in this new model?

- a. The term will remain the same at 3 years.

4. When will we move to this structure?

- a. We plan to move to the new structure starting January 2022.

5. How will Elders be selected?

- a. Elders will be selected as they have always been, through the Nominating Committee. If you are interested in serving, please contact Marjorie Lock at nominating@firstpresah.org

6. Under this new structure, how will committee chairs be selected?

- a. The committee chairs can be any member of the church, whether they are currently serving as an elder or not. The determination of who will serve as the chair will be at the discretion of each committee.

7. How does this change the role of the committee chairs?

- a. Some of the responsibilities of the committee chairs will remain the same, such as monthly reporting to Session and seeking Session approval when required. What will change are the foci of committee chairs, especially those chairs drawn from the membership of the congregation. Committee chairs will be able to focus on broader engagement of the congregation along with greater attention to the mission of First Pres. This change will allow committee chairs to have greater flexibility over committee composition and have more time to allocate to committee functions because they will not be required to attend every Session meeting.

8. If the Committee Chairs are not part of Session, how will Session know what is happening on the committees?

- a. Committees will continue to submit reports to Session as they do today. We will ensure this free flow of communication is maintained and build that into the ongoing structure of both groups.

9. How does this empower committees?

- a. The combination of size reduction and committee structure will foster greater participation from the congregation by expanding leadership opportunities for the congregation. These increased leadership opportunities will also broaden representation. Committees will also have greater flexibility and more time to focus on the committee's purpose.

10. How does this impact me, as a member of the congregation?

- a. One of the objectives of this change is to provide more and easier avenues for congregants to engage in the work and missions of the church. We encourage you to take opportunity to explore committee membership and leadership as they come available and/or reach out to Session directly at vision@firstpresah.org

11. How does this get more people in the congregation involved?

- a. By separating the committee chair position from the role of elder, we will allow a wider swath of the congregation to take an active role on committees. Let us know if you would like to get involved!

12. How does this move help us deliver our mission?

- a. We are striving to become a less pastor centric church. This means we have to get the congregation more involved in determining the direction and execution of the vision of the church. By having less elders on Session and removing committee oversight responsibilities, we open the door for the elders to set the vision, determine the tactics to execute the vision and establish metrics as to whether the vision is being achieved.

13. If we didn't do this, what would happen?

- a. The practice of relying on the pastoral staff to bear the brunt of establishing and executing the vision and strategy is unsustainable. Every time a pastor leaves, we lose our identity and shed members. This new model will allow us to establish our identity apart from any one pastor and create a culture where the pastors are facilitating the mission of the congregation as opposed to the other way around.

14. What is the next step?

- a. Once the congregation has approved the change in the number of members on Session, the Vision & Strategy Committee (already a subcommittee of Session) will focus on creating the actual plan that transitions us to the new structure.

15. What will the Session spend their time on, specifically in the next 6-12 months and after we move to this new structure?

- a. Roughly speaking, the first half of 2021 will be focused on creating the transition plan and the second half on executing it so that we are ready to operate in the new structure by January 2022. Ongoing, Session will be more fully focused on setting direction and decisions that help more fully engage the congregation in achieving our mission via the committees.

16. How will we know what progress is being made and how this is working?

- a. We understand that transparency and open lines of communication are really important as we make these changes. We will communicate with the congregation regularly on this topic to report status as we created and execute this transition plan.

17. What has been done or will be done to address other feedback from the CAT survey?

- a. This is the first step that will allow the Session to take a more active approach in addressing the other issues raised by the CAT survey (readiness for ministry, hospitality, conflict management, spirituality). Per the advice of our consultant, Susan Czologosz, once the governance is more efficient and focused on vision and strategy as opposed to logistics, then the Session can more easily address the other concerns raised by the CAT survey and create effective solutions to correct them.

18. Who should I contact if I have questions or want to get involved?

- a. We have created an email box to collect any questions not addressed in the Question & Answer document. Please submit them to vision@firstpresah.org and one of the Session members will respond.

19. Will the Vision and Strategy Committee still exist after the change?

- a. After the change is initiated, the long-term goal will be to transition the entire Session over to being primarily focused on the vision and strategy of the church.

20. Is this in accordance with church polity?

- a. The motion reflects a change in the size of Session as the size of the congregation has changed since the By-Laws were first adopted in 1996. Furthermore, the motion is consistent with previous changes made to the size of the Boards of the church, such as the reduction in the size of the Board of Deacons in 2009. The motion seeks a range in the number of elders in active service that enables the Session to continue to fulfill its constitutional responsibilities as stated in the Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church (USA), specifically G-3.0201, and allows for flexibility in the event of changes that may arise over time in the mission and ministry of the church.