

## Committee on Ministry states its case; Lay Committee leaders respond to report

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The Committee on Ministry of the Presbytery of Western North Carolina has prepared a six-page background paper outlining its reasons for proposing that the presbytery invalidate the ministry of Parker T. Williamson as chief executive officer of the Presbyterian Lay Committee and editor in chief of its publications.

The following is the text of the sections of that background paper. The numbered sections are followed by indented sections that summarize the response of Williamson and the Lay Committee's leaders.

### **Information on Validated Ministries and the Recommendation of the Committee on Ministry not to validate the ministry of the Chief Executive Officer and Editor of *The Layman***

In light of the confusion and possible misconceptions around the recommendation of the Committee on Ministry not to validate the work of the Chief Executive Officer and Editor of *The Layman*, the Committee presents the following information to the presbytery:

#### **1) Why does the presbytery have to get involved in the work of the editor of *The Layman*?**

A presbytery is responsible for the mission and government of the church throughout its geographical area. The presbytery has the responsibility and power to develop strategy for the mission of the church in its area consistent with G-3.000 (G-11.0103). The presbytery also has responsibility and power to designate ministers to work in forms of ministry recognized as appropriate by the presbytery (G-11.0103p).

The presbytery must determine whether the work of a minister beyond the jurisdiction of the church is a calling consonant (in harmony) with the mission of the presbytery. Any job a minister wishes to call a ministry which is not directly under the umbrella of the church has to be approved as a ministry in keeping with the presbytery's mission (G-11.0103, G-11.0411). This determination must be done annually.

In order to carry out these responsibilities, a presbytery must determine which ministries, other than those performed in a local church, are valid ministries.

***Response:***

*The mission of the Presbyterian Lay Committee is “to inform and equip God’s people by proclaiming Jesus Christ alone as the way of salvation, the truth of God’s Word and the life of discipleship.” In what sense is this mission not in keeping with the mission of the Presbytery of Western North Carolina?*

**2) How does the presbytery go about the task of deciding which ministries to validate? Is the way the presbytery carries out the task fair?**

Recognizing the increasing complexity of the task of validating ministries and in response to the Committee on Ministries growing work load, during the Spring and Summer of 2002 the Committee on Ministry circulated to ministers in validated ministry positions a process for adoption by the presbytery for dealing with all requests for validating or renewing ministries other than those in installed positions in a local congregation. The Committee on Ministry took the process to the October meeting of presbytery in 2002 and the presbytery approved for the first time a process for dealing with validated ministries. The process includes a series of steps and safeguards for dealing with each request for validation of a ministry by the presbytery. The steps include the formation of a task force to review and advise the Committee on Ministry on validated ministry requests and renewals. The Task Force is composed of ministers and elders representing the Committee on Ministry, the Coordinating Council, a minister in a local congregation and a minister serving in a validated ministry position.

The newly established Task Force began its work after the October 2002 meeting of Presbytery. The work of the Task Force includes reading and reviewing all requests for renewal of validation. The Task Force collects information and interviews ministers and sometimes representatives of the employing organization of the minister. If the Task Force advises that a ministry is not a valid ministry of the presbytery, then the minister, the employer and the Committee on Ministry are so advised.

***Response:***

- A) *We have direct testimony from a member of the task force that written material submitted by the Presbyterian Lay Committee, describing its ministry in relation to criteria specified in G-11.0103 was not reviewed or even discussed by the task force during its meetings.*
- B) *A letter from the chairman of the Presbyterian Lay Committee was addressed to task force chairman, Mary V. Atkinson, c/o Rev. William Taber. Mr. Taber did not deliver the letter to Ms. Atkinson, nor did he read it, or even mention receipt of it at the task force meeting subsequent to his receipt of the letter.*
- C) *Gerrit Dawson, a member of the task force who attended each of these meetings, will testify to this.*

The Committee on Ministry examines each recommendation and makes its own decision about a recommendation to the presbytery regarding validating the ministry.

**Response:**

- A) *The Committee on Ministry examined only the recommendation from the task force. It was not given any supporting documentation for the recommendation, nor did it review any of the written material that had been submitted to the task force by the Presbyterian Lay Committee.*
- B) *The Committee on Ministry had ample opportunity to become informed of the Presbyterian Lay Committee's ministry. In fact, seven months prior to the meeting in which it decided to declare the Lay Committee's ministry invalid, the Committee on Ministry received an invitation from the Lay Committee to tour its offices and visit with any and all staff members. The Committee on Ministry acknowledged receipt of this invitation by letter on April 23: "The Committee on Ministry ... gratefully acknowledges the invitation of Reverend Williamson to tour the Lenoir facilities and meet with staff. We will call Reverend Williamson and schedule a time to act on his invitation." No call was made by the Committee on Ministry during the ensuing seven months.*
- C) *Subsequent to its receipt of the task force recommendation, the Committee on Ministry had ample opportunity (two months) to become informed of the Presbyterian Lay Committee's ministry by requesting a meeting with Reverend Williamson and/or the Chairman of the Presbyterian Lay Committee.*
- 1) *Neither Reverend Williamson nor Mrs. Peggy Hedden, the chairman, received any letter, telephone call, or any other communication from the Committee on Ministry, inviting them to discuss any matter that may have been a concern to the Committee on Ministry.*
  - 2) *When Reverend Taber informed Williamson of the task force recommendation and the date of the Committee on Ministry's subsequent meeting (December 9, 2003) when it would be discussed, he told Williamson, "You can be there if you want to." Williamson replied that he would be in California during that week, but that he would send a letter to the Committee on Ministry, urging it not to adopt the task force recommendation.*
  - 3) *The Committee on Ministry met a second time, January 13, 2004, at which time a review of its December 9 decision to recommend against validation was docketed. No letter of invitation was sent to the Presbyterian Lay Committee regarding this meeting. In a telephone conversation on January 12, the day before the meeting, Williamson asked Taber if the matter of his validated ministry would be discussed by the Committee on Ministry on the following day. Taber acknowledged that it would be and said, "Are*

*you asking to be there?” Williamson replied that in light of the fact that the Committee on Ministry had issued no invitation and that it had already made up its mind on the matter, he saw no reason to invite himself to such a meeting.*

- 4) *Reverend Laura Long and Reverend William Serjak attended these Committee on Ministry meetings as members and can testify as to the truth of these matters.*

The next step in the process is that the presbytery votes whether to validate the ministry.

Three different votes are required. Three different steps and three separate votes, by increasingly larger and more inclusive groups, ending with the entire presbytery, is the process which the presbytery adopted in October of 2002. This process has been used throughout 2003; some ministries have been voted as valid, and some have not.

The presbytery will officially receive the recommendation of the Committee on Ministry at the January meeting for validation of several ministries. Then the presbytery will act on the recommendations. In every case the presbytery votes to validate or not. This process ensures that the vote is representative of the broad base of the entire presbytery.

### **3) What criteria are used to make a judgement [sic] about validation?**

In order to help with the judgement [sic] of whether a ministry can be considered valid, the Book of Order provides guidance. The Book of Order provides statements defining the mission of the church (G-3.0000) and characteristics of the nature of ordained office (G-6.0000), along with specific standards which must be fulfilled (G-11.0403). (*The full text of G-3.0000 The Church and Its Mission, G-6.0000 The Church and Its Officers and G-11.0403 The Presbytery, follow on subsequent pages.*)

These standards may be supplemented by written criteria the presbytery develops. The presbytery voted to use only the written material in the Book of Order.

### **4) I have heard that the recommendation is part of a “liberal conspiracy.” Is there a track record to support that claim?**

The Committee on Ministry has previously made recommendations to the presbytery on validation of ministries. The track record of the Committee on Ministry shows a track record of impartiality. The presbytery has validated the ministry of some ministers; the presbytery has declined to validate the ministry of other ministers. The record of the Committee on Ministry and the Validated Ministry Task Force demonstrate such claims are inaccurate and without foundation. A list of the ministries and ministers who serve in those positions which the presbytery has voted on since the Task Force began its work can be found at the back of this report.

***Response:***

*The Committee on Ministry's recommendations not to validate certain ministries appear to be inconsequential, e.g., ministers who have not attended any presbytery meetings or participated in any presbytery events, ministers who failed to submit reports to the Committee on Ministry, etc. These were not matters of substance, certainly not on par with the committee's decision regarding the Williamson validation.*

**5) Would the Rev. Parker Williamson be stripped of his ordination by a vote not to classify his job at *The Layman* to be a valid ministry of this presbytery?**

A change in the status of his membership from active to inactive would occur, but loss of ordination would depend on the actions within the control of Rev. Williamson, *The Layman*, and the presbytery.

***Response:***

*The Committee on Ministry is obfuscating the fact that the consequence of invalidating Williamson's ministry is the loss of his ordination. It places the burden on him to leave a ministry to which God has called him in order to save his ordination. This is a "blame the victim" argument.*

**6) I'm not sure I understand.**

The presbytery must keep a roll of ministers. Each minister must be placed in one of three categories: active member, member-at-large, or inactive. An active member is a minister who has been admitted to the presbytery and is now engaged in ministry that complies with all of the criteria of G-11.0403 without exception. A member-at-large is a minister who has been an active member and who now, without intentional abandonment of the exercise of ministry, is no longer engaged in a ministry that complies with all the criteria in G-11.0403. "An inactive member is a minister who is voluntarily engaged in an occupation that does not comply with all of the criteria in G-11.0403" (G-11.0406c).

When a minister works for an organization which is beyond the jurisdiction of the church, the minister's status is either active or inactive. If the minister is working at a job which the presbytery determines to be a valid ministry of the presbytery, then the minister is active in ministry. If a minister voluntarily works in an occupation which the presbytery does not see as a valid ministry of the presbytery, then the minister is placed on the inactive roll.

**7) Does that mean the minister is no longer a minister?**

No, that simply means the minister is no longer working in a valid ministry of the presbytery. The status on the presbytery's rolls would change.

**8) What effect would that have on a minister?**

As long as the minister continued on the inactive roll, the minister would not be able to vote or speak during debates of presbytery, except in matters relating to the minister. If

the minister voluntarily chooses to remain in a job which the presbytery has determined is not a valid ministry of the presbytery, then the minister would be carried on the inactive roll for three years. At the end of three years, the minister would be dropped from the rolls of presbytery.

**9) Can a minister's status be changed from inactive to active?**

Yes. A minister can do a number of things to move from inactive to active status. The minister could ask another presbytery to validate the ministry. The work could be modified by the minister and the employing organization, making the job a ministry consonant with the mission and ministry of presbytery. The minister could change jobs. If any one of those three options were chosen, the minister would be placed on the active roll of a presbytery.

**10) How did the Committee on Ministry recommend that the ministry of another person associated with *The Layman* be validated and that the job of Chief Executive Officer and Editor not be validated?**

The job descriptions and responsibilities for the two positions are not similar. In the opinion of the Validated Ministry Task Force and the Committee on Ministry, the work of Rev. Steve Strickler was a valid ministry of the presbytery. Both work under the umbrella organization of the Lay Committee, but the two jobs are distinctly different. Rev. Strickler's job title is that of "Director of Church Relations." He described his work as that of servant ministry involving intercessory prayer, encouragement, providing printed resources (*The Lay Committee publishes and distributes Sunday school curriculum, a variety of books on theology and resources*), preaching and teaching. A recommendation to validate one job as ministry has no bearing on a decision about another job.

***Response:***

- A) *The Committee on Ministry ignores the fact that as Chief Executive Officer, Williamson is responsible for all ministries of the Presbyterian Lay Committee and all staff persons are accountable to him for the character and conduct of their work.*
- B) *The Committee on Ministry also ignores the fact that all staff persons in the employ of the Presbyterian Lay Committee are fully committed to every aspect of its mission and ministry.*

**11) Why aren't we concerned with organizations or people who purportedly seek to defy the constitution?**

Concerns have been expressed by some people that the presbytery is ignoring those groups who openly express defiance of the constitutional standards as recorded in the Book of Order. The Presbytery of Western North Carolina has no jurisdiction over any of those ministers or ministries. Our presbytery can validate or decline to validate only those ministries within Western North Carolina.

**12) The Presbytery has voted to validate the ministry of Rev. Williamson since 1989; what is different now?**

The largest contribution to the change has been the process. Until October of 2002, the presbytery did not have a Validated Ministry Task Force and had not approved a procedure for assessing validated ministries. Throughout 2003 the Task Force reviewed many requests for validation that had previously been approved and requested from many ministers changes in the way in which their ministry was carried out, in order that the ministries might be eligible for validation. Other ministries which had been previously approved have also been declined for approval. This year is the first time that the ministry of the Chief Executive Officer and Editor of *The Layman* has been examined throughly [sic] by the recently established procedure approved by presbytery.

***Response:***

- A) *The “recently established procedure” consists only of one face-to-face meeting between the minister and the Validated Ministry Task Force and a subsequent recommendation by the task force to the Committee on Ministry. In previous years, Rev. Williamson has sent to the Committee on Ministry itself written answers to questions that were identical to those that appeared on the task force form.*
- B) *By the Committee on Ministry’s own admission, stated earlier in this paper, the Presbytery of Western North Carolina made no change in its criteria for validated ministries. It merely affirmed criteria that appear in relevant sections of the Book of Order. These criteria have not changed since 1989, when Rev. Williamson’s ministry was first validated by the presbytery.*

**13) Is that the only reason? Some believe that *The Layman*’s stand on giving to the denomination is the real issue.**

This presbytery pays per-capita to the denomination but does not ask the churches for per-capita. This presbytery has a single budget just like local churches. The presbytery pays per-capita to both the synod and the General Assembly as we are constitutionally bound to do. Individual congregations are not required to pay per-capita. It’s not about money.

Although money is not the issue, the article in *The Layman* entitled “A Declaration of Conscience” was troubling to the Task Force and to the COM. *The Layman* made a statement which said, “We no longer believe that either the General Assembly per-capita budget or the unrestricted mission budget of the PCUSA is worthy of support.” That statement is a new statement. It is also a deeply troubling statement. A validated ministry of this presbytery should be consonant, in harmony, with our presbytery’s mission and ministry. For a newspaper, whose Editor and Chief Executive Officer’s work must be validated as a ministry of this presbytery, to state that the mission budget of the denomination is no longer worthy of support is not consistent with this presbytery’s involvement in mission with the larger church.

**Response:**

- A) *The Declaration of Conscience does not challenge “the mission budget of the denomination,” as falsely alleged by the Committee on Ministry, but “the unrestricted mission budget of the denomination.”*
- B) *There may be some ministries within the denomination’s mission budget that are worthy of support. In fact, the Presbyterian Lay Committee believes that some are, particularly our overseas evangelistic missionaries whose funding has been drastically cut by the General Assembly while it continues massive funding for the World and National Councils of Churches and the denomination’s Washington Political Lobby.*

**14) Is this entire debate and vote worth all the trouble?**

The Committee on Ministry is aware that to decline to classify the work of the editor of *The Layman* as a valid ministry of this presbytery is controversial. Some people have said this vote will promote a denomination-wide schism. Some people have said they plan to disrupt the work of the presbytery. Some have said they will advocate not sending money to the presbytery. Others have asked what has taken us so long to come to this decision. Others have said that the divisiveness of *The Layman* is disruptive and tears at the very fabric of the church. Others have said the brazen manipulation of stories in *The Layman* is contributing to schism.

No one wants the kind of heat this debate is generating, but how ministry is conducted is important. The character and conduct of a ministry is important. Whether a job can be considered a valid ministry consonant with this presbytery’s ministry is a vital and faithful debate.

The Committee on Ministry struggled with its recommendation. It is with great reluctance that we made the recommendation we did. We are not trying to silence a voice that disagrees; we are not making a fight where there was none. We are simply advising the presbytery that the character of the words and articles, the voice and tone of *The Layman* is seen by us as a work which, instead of tearing down the dividing walls of hostility as the church is called to do, instead furthers hostility, suspicion and division. Too often the articles do not further reconciliation. The Layman’s voice and leadership, its very words, are part of the ministry of the Rev. Williamson as Editor and Chief Executive Officer. It is the editorial work, not a theological stand or a specific declaration, which the Committee on Ministry declined to recommend to be a validated ministry of this presbytery. The work, sadly, does not demonstrate consistently a love for one another that should characterize the life of the church.

There are ways to state disagreement, strong condemnation when necessary, and clear calls for repentance that would be and could be valid ministries of this presbytery. The Committee on Ministry of this presbytery welcomes strong prophetic voices reminding us to be open to the possibilities and perils of our denominational life to insure the faithfulness and usefulness of our church for God’s glory. The Committee on Ministry

believes that the presbytery would also welcome such voices. We are mindful that all of us need to be open to God's continuing reformation of the church. *The Layman*, through the work of the Chief Executive Officer and Editor, could contribute to that openness to the possibilities and perils of our denominational life, but the manner in which the work is currently being done has been determined by the Committee on Ministry to be more destructive than constructive, more divisive than unifying.

To be sure, *The Layman* does provide resources and Biblical and theological studies which do contribute to the faithfulness of the church. However, *The Layman's* voice and words and tone, set by its Editor and Chief Executive Officer, are not consistent with Paul's admonition, "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Eph. 4:2) Therefore, the Committee on Ministry recommends that the Presbytery of Western North Carolina decline to validate Reverend Williamson's ministry.

Knowing that there are men and women who share our faith who will disagree, the Committee on Ministry is grateful that this will be a decision of the presbytery made after careful thought and guided by prayer. May God bless our discussion and our life together as children of grace.

### ***Reponse***

A) No one is arguing with these assertions by the Committee on Ministry. The Presbyterian Lay Committee agrees that the "character and conduct of a ministry is important." But this begs the question. Specifically, with what character and what conduct does the Committee on Ministry find fault?

- 1) Without specification or any evidence to document its charges, the Committee on Ministry vaguely states that "the character of the words and articles, the voice and tone of the Layman is seen by us as a work which ... furthers hostility, suspicion and division."
  - a) The Committee on Ministry knows that were charges of this nature offered in a court – including a Presbyterian Church (USA) court – they would be dismissed summarily. But the Committee on Ministry has chosen to slip around requirements like "the rules of evidence" by taking the legislative route.
  - b) Even so, this Committee should be required to substantiate its charge, for otherwise it has imperiled itself by impugning the integrity of a minister and his ministry.
- 2) It is noteworthy that the Presbyterian Lay Committee has faced charges like this before from those who take offense at its reporting or disagree with its editorial position. In fact, there have been no less than five (5) General Assembly level

inquiries into its journalism. Unlike the Committee on Ministry's unresearched statements of opinion, several commissions that conducted these inquiries took their task seriously.

- a) All five inquiries are cited in the Presbyterian Lay Committee's written material that was included in the pre-presbytery meeting packet. We will cite only the most recent study (1995-1996) at this time.
- b) The Special Committee on Reconciliation with the Presbyterian Lay Committee (1995) met for a full year with a committee of the Presbyterian Lay Committee, during which time it commissioned a former Associated Press reporter to examine a full year's issues of *The Presbyterian Layman*. Thousands of words were examined and documentation was checked. At the end of that examination, not a single error of fact was found.
- c) In spite of the above findings, politically motivated members of the Special Committee proceeded to craft a recommendation to the 1996 General Assembly, using precisely the same "tone" and "reconciliation" language that is now being suggested by the Committee on Ministry.
- d) On the advice of its commissioners' committee, the Cincinnati General Assembly rejected the substance of that recommendation by a landslide vote of 517 to 20, and it declared its hope that this matter would not be brought up again!