

Date: June 12, 2020
By email to: Commissioners of General Assembly and Presbyterians on the attached list
From: Elders of San Geronimo Community Presbyterian Church
Re: Please Save San Francisco Theological Seminary

Our Appreciation and Thanks to You All

We thank our three Commissioners for agreeing to serve The Presbytery of the Redwoods at the 2020 General Assembly: Reverend Dr. Cindy Alloway, Charles D. Stark, Esq., and Hudson Davis. We appreciate the work and organization of officers, staff, and volunteers who are planning or participating in the 2020 General Assembly. We trust this letter may assist in your prayerful deliberations.

We Are Christian Missionaries in California

The 15 people signing this letter are ordained elders currently or formerly serving as ruling elders of Session for San Geronimo Community Presbyterian Church. Collectively, we have over 100 years experience as members of Session for SGCP Church.

Our church is located in Marin County, California about 8 miles from San Francisco Theological Seminary.

SGCP Church joined in the petition submitted to General Assembly, stating:

"The Presbytery of the Redwoods supports (1) the continuation of the historic and longstanding relationship between San Francisco Theological Seminary (SFTS) and the Presbyterian Church USA, and the continuation of SFTS (part of the Graduate School of Theology of the University of Redlands) as a designated seminary of the denomination."

You may be aware that many cities and towns in California and some Western states have low rates of church membership and sparse attendance at worship services. SGCP Church welcomes about 100 enrolled members, donors, attendees and volunteers. In our community of 4,000 residents, SGCP Church and a small Catholic church are the only formally organized Christian institutions.

At times, we feel like missionaries in a distant outpost. So we do a lot of community outreach--food pantry, 12-step recovery programs, childcare center, disaster relief and emergency supplies, and youth sing team, as examples.

California Churches and SFTS Are Mutually Blessed with a Longstanding Relationship

SFTS students are invited by our churches to preach sermons, participate in Bible study and prayer groups, and observe session and presbytery meetings. Seminarians of SFTS bring their children to Sunday School, lead youth field trips, and offer new ideas for communications and media.

The SFTS intern program supports and guides seminarians and churches. SGCP Church recently engaged a paid intern who has since graduated and is now a U.S. Navy chaplain. We currently work with a volunteer SFTS intern who guides our Zoom worship during the Covid shut down.

Seminary participation in our local communities can attract teens, young adults, and families with children to Christian activities. When seminarians and their families visit our Sunday worship, they bring special energy and share new experiences.

SFTS was at the forefront educating elders and congregations about "Safe Church" practices to prevent child abuse and sexual misconduct. The SFTS program inspired a policy and practice manual that is now a model in The Presbytery of the Redwoods.

These are examples of SFTS benefits for SGCP Church and other congregations in Northern California. We pray that SFTS benefits may be expanded and strengthened for Presbyterians in Southern California because of the new relationship between SFTS and University of Redlands.

Financial Contributions and Stewardship

For decades, our small church has donated \$1,000 each year to Synod of the Pacific, earmarked for theological education. Our intent and purpose was, and remains, the support of SFTS.

We were shocked to read that, in its February letter to SFTS, Presbyterian Foundation stated "... since you are no longer Presbyterians, we will be keeping your funds."

Before General Assembly authorizes any transfer of SFTS funds, we respectfully request an independent inquiry on the sources and future disposition of SFTS assets and money held by Presbyterian Foundation. To what other entity or purpose would the SFTS money be re-directed?

We ask General Assembly to consider how SFTS can continue its mutually beneficial relationship with Western churches, if SFTS is prohibited from using its own money to pay for faculty, student scholarships, interns, and educational programs for Presbyterian clergy and elders?

We also ask General Assembly to consider the broader implications for future contributions by churches and individual donors for Presbyterian causes:

- Will diversion of funds from SFTS discourage future donations to theological education generally?
- If Presbyterian Foundation has authority to determine seminaries or other affiliates "are no longer Presbyterians", can Presbyterian Foundation also confiscate money it holds for food pantries, preschools, or youth summer camps?
- Can churches and donors be confident their contributions for specific Presbyterian causes will be used for designated purposes?

Report to 2022 General Assembly on Facts and Solutions

We are informed that, in year 2024, the merger agreement of SFTS and University of Redlands may allow changes in SFTS faculty appointments, asset dispositions, and Board representation. These are legitimate concerns and we are grateful COTE and Presbyterian Foundation brought these matters to the attention of General Assembly.

However, before SFTS makes changes in 2024, there is time and opportunity for COTE, Presbyterian Foundation, and SFTS to meet and confer with University of Redlands about amending or supplementing the merger agreement. The parties have mutual interests in reaching understandings that protect Presbyterian traditions and Christian stewardship of assets.

We respectfully suggest 2020 General Assembly might consider appointing an independent task force to study facts and suggest solutions that accommodate the reasonable expectations of SFTS, University of Redlands, COTE and Presbyterian Foundation. For example:

- SFTS and COTE could adopt a monitoring procedure for faculty appointments, teaching methods and curriculum.
- The parties may revise financial arrangements and Board representation to ensure prudent stewardship of Presbyterian-donated funds and SFTS assets.
- Six months before the 2022 General Assembly, the independent task force could issue a report available to Western state churches and presbyteries, as well as other Presbyterians.

The 2022 General Assembly plenary agenda should consider the report and any recommended actions. With greater transparency and due process, Presbyterians could be confident we have explored realistic options, before the 2024 merger agreement timeline. We request 2020 General Assembly not rush to terminate the relationship between Presbyterian Church USA and its only seminary in the Western states.

Conclusion

We believe Presbyterian Church USA is better off with San Francisco Theological Seminary, than without it.

The open hands and open heart message of our Lord Jesus Christ invites new Christians, fallen-away Christians, doubters, and sinners. There will always be variations in theological beliefs among members of our denomination. We are creative people who adapt to changed circumstances. The Presbyterian Church grows under a big tent.

Thank you for your prayerful deliberations on these issues. We trust God will empower General Assembly to discern His path.

Respectfully submitted by Elders of San Geronimo Community Presbyterian Church

Gen Sheppard	Stan Loar
Kit Krauss	Sue Loar
Joe Sharp	Elaine Behrens
Lani Bjork	Rich Behrens
Amanda Smith	Marilyn Halseth
Kelly Lawson	Eldon Halseth
Steve Pinkney	Jody Martin
	Peggy Sheneman

Contacts for San Geronimo Community Presbyterian Church:

Rev. Katharine Clayton 707-291-5897

sgpastor@att.net k.clayton@sbcglobal.net

Peggy Sheneman 415-488-4426

pshene@comcast.net sgpchurch@sbcglobal.net

Addressees:

Rev. Dr. Cindy Alloway callowaypastorn@gmail.com

Charles D. Stark, Esq. starklaw@sonic.net

Hudson Davis HUDSONDAVIS5@gmail.com

Ariel Mink, Stated Clerk of The Presbytery of the Redwoods redwoodsclerk@gmail.com

Rev. Robert Conover, Mission Presbyter/Stated Clerk (retired), The Presbytery of the Redwoods
robertconover@gmail.com

Jana Childers, Dean of San Francisco Theological Seminary

JChilders@SFTS.edu jana_childers@redlands.edu

Addressees have permission to forward this letter to other people.