

February 17, 2022

To elders in the RPCNA:

*“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13:34-35*

With grief of heart, we as members of the Immanuel RP congregation (IRPC) are writing as an expression of our love for the Lord and for you, his people. We desire to communicate the heart of sheep at IRPC and we are hopeful and prayerful that there may be shepherds and people who will care to listen. The events surrounding our church and our elders have been devastating on all kinds of levels. Our intent with this letter is to:

- Inform and correct misinformation about our congregation
- Allow the Spirit to work in individuals of ways they may need to repent
- Call individuals and presbyteries and the denomination to embrace a gospel culture and not just gospel doctrine

IRPC is a thriving and growing, albeit wounded and hurting, gospel-loving congregation who continue to live out and see the beauty of grace and love and holiness overcoming all brokenness and sin. We have believed the RPCNA has stood for this truth and yet in the recent past, we have watched a departure from walking on the line of the gospel, maybe not in doctrine, but in practice.

Through this ordeal, our elders have not publicly defended themselves or sought their own vindication. They have continued to repent, confess, and repent more for sins and faults, and they have entrusted themselves to the one who judges justly. We have watched other members of the RPCNA not only ignore these choices but also ignore the sheep that God has placed under these men. Rather than tender care for the flock or our fallible brothers in Christ, we are the recipients of what feels retribution in being hacked apart by the ripping apart of our elders. This does not look like the gospel.

It may not be known across the RPCNA, but by and large, we trust our elders and we believe in what God is doing in and through this church in our families and in our community. This body, including families of victims of the original abuse, has extended forgiveness and rejoiced over the repentance and willingness for reconciliation and restitution that we have witnessed in our elders. We are discouraged that others in the denomination do not feel the same and have not sought to come here and ask us.

Rather than a passionate care for the souls of God's people, we have continuously seen a primary passion for and a defending of the judicial process. We have felt that this entire disciplinary process has not been carried out with gentleness, carefulness, love, fairness, or humility (BoD I.6.7).

We not only disagree with the decisions that have propagated throughout the past year but more, we are dumbfounded on the departure from the gospel.

We call the RPCNA back to living out what it says it believes. Many of us are concerned at this juncture about this trajectory away from the line of the gospel. Perhaps other folks in the denomination are not aware of just how steep the angle is away from the grace of Jesus Christ, and we are asking for you all to consider if you or your elders are believing what Jesus has called us as His church to live out in Ephesians 4:1-3:

*"I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."*

In order to obey Jesus' commands in Matthew 18, we feel it important to lay out hurts and offenses that members of our congregation have experienced. We get the deep sense that not all elders in the RPCNA know how most of this congregation sees things from the ground and the amount of continual damage we are enduring throughout this process. These matters have now been made public, so we privately offer a few considerations for many who are disconnected from the events and are likely only hearing skewed and fragmented information:

Major injustices:

- Our congregation has continued to not be considered (Acts 20:28). Both investigative reports have said we do not trust our elders, but we were *never* asked as a body and most of us do trust our elders.
- There have been multiple attempts to meet with many different parties to promote reconciliation and restoration and they have been denied, delayed or ignored.<sup>1</sup>
- Members of RPCNA continue to take these matters publicly to the media including information from documents labeled, "RPCNA Limited Distribution ONLY" and now our congregation and our brothers' names, families and reputations and the cause of Christ have been slandered and smeared. (RPCNA Testimony 26.1: concern for fellow believers should be a restraint to evil, especially to unkind speech and action against one another).

- Multiple decisions that affect our congregation keep being made yet we are dismissed, ignored, or uninformed.<sup>2</sup>
- Members of the RPCNA have threatened a lawsuit against our congregation while a trial is pending (1 Cor 6:1-8).
- An aggrieved, filing family who asked for the original commission has never met with our pastor or elders (who were open to meeting) to discuss their grievances or the conclusions of the commission (no cover-up found) but they have publicly spoken to the Indianapolis Star. (Matt 18)
- Another congregation in the Great Lakes Gulf (GLG) Presbytery has not informed members of the presence of a minor sexual abuser in the congregation, much less told who the abuser is by name. And a congregation wasn't informed of an adult registered sex offender who attended church until his death. What is the rubric for deciding when an abuser is revealed? The presbytery is not holding the same standards across all congregations. Should we publicly expose this other session for "covering up" these abusers? Should this session also be facing a trial? These questions may seem harsh, but we ask them so you may understand the double standard that is apparent to us.
- The Shepherding Committee's (appointed by presbytery March 2021) good work and report has been ignored. Please see the endnote for their conclusions and recommendations.<sup>3</sup>
- At the Presbytery level:
  - The Presbytery Judicial Commission (PJC) report failed to represent our congregation, our elders and 'victim families.' (March 2021).
  - The PJC report established unprofessional evidence and labels (contradicting witnesses' testimonies and Dept. of Child Services (DCS) conclusions) that were outside ecclesiastical matters and this information has subsequently been pushed forward throughout the entire process.<sup>4</sup>
  - The bias of the report forced 'victim families' to disclose their identities. This also led to more harm when the identities of victims were released without permission by elders in the GLG presbytery to the entire presbytery.<sup>5</sup>
  - Only 1 'victim family' was invited, allowed to attend executive session and speak on the floor while other 'victim families' were not invited at all and were told not to come to the meeting.<sup>6</sup>
  - Investigators volunteered themselves as prosecutors (and were appointed) 3 months before charges were written and sent.
  - Investigators sent the report out to all of presbytery before making every effort to avoid a trial and follow Matthew 18 by sitting down with our session to discuss the findings, seek reconciliation and private resolution (BoD II.1.1: Formal process shall not be instituted unless evidence is

presented that the means of reconciliation...have been tried. Before such process is instituted, it is proper for the court to seek a solution of the case without formal trial). The manner in which they shared their findings is also concerning.<sup>7</sup>

- Only one side was heard at presbytery to the exclusion of other parties, resulting in men speaking harshly and voting in favor of establishing prosecutors and a trial (before charges were brought) without considering all facts.<sup>8</sup>
  - The report stated there was no evidence of a cover-up or any intentional, malicious sin and that our elders were in complete compliance with the civil authorities. The current narrative says otherwise. This reversal causes us to question the investigations.
  - Elders were removed (and then some were allowed back, only to be removed again), from serving in local and presbytery capacities without biblical/judicial/pastoral rationale. (BOD I.1.5: Discipline should be exercised with prudence, discretion, humility.)
- At the Synod level:
    - Men volunteered to be prosecutors before the commission was even created (June 2021).<sup>9</sup>
    - A vote was not taken to substantiate the complaint of IRPC members.<sup>10</sup>
    - Some of those involved with the investigation felt it was woefully incomplete, inaccurate, and unprofessional, and unbiblical actions remain unaccounted for, making the process of defense impossible and awash in hopeless subjectivism.<sup>11</sup>
    - Charges lack specificity (see BoD II.2.1: The charge shall “name the specific offense, the time, place and circumstances of its commission.”) and biblical standards.<sup>12</sup>
    - A neutral investigation by a professional investigative group was requested and denied (Nov. 2021). Instead a very complex sex abuse case was investigated by four preachers.
    - Due to the ongoing damage to our congregation by media coverage and more for the cause of Christ, some of us do not understand why the SJC determined the upcoming trials of our elders should be carried out in an open forum? This seems deeply insensitive to the dynamics of the case.
  - Most members/elders in the RPCNA are unaware that there are serious and grievous, non-public mitigating factors that our session has navigated from the beginning of when the original abuse was discovered (April 2020) and up to this day. One victim family involved in the initial abuse case was hurt and

disappointed when the entire session was informed and the elders tried shepherding out of love and care to be compassionate to the family's hurt in a complicated situation. Not only this situation, but other mitigating factors play directly into the 'cover-up' narrative, yet our session has maintained shepherding honor, discretion and privacy regardless of how it looks to the onlooking world and the cost to them. Due to their discretion, decisions in regards to these mitigating factors are being attributed to the original abuse case and are being used as evidence to sustain the public and ecclesiastical narrative that most elders in the RPCNA have read in reports or heard through presbytery/synod. This is astoundingly frustrating. For the members here who are aware of these mitigating factors, to watch our elders humbly maintain discretion and be attacked endlessly and be misunderstood without mercy and now removed from their office grieves our hearts. We are watching a Christlikeness of being silent in the hour of trial and being crucified and dying to oneself to preserve the good of another. We are also watching the response by others with malice, hate, slander, and false accusations. This is hauntingly familiar to all of us. We were more hopeful that this denomination would recognize the gospel as it is displayed before them and be willing to extend it back out.<sup>13</sup>

- Our congregation is now damaged by the removal of our leaders (Jan. 2022).
- Our leaders are now damaged by the demolition of their reputations, the destruction of the livelihood of our pastor and his family, and harmed by the sinful actions of hurt people who seem resistant to reconciliation.
- Our congregation continues to be harmed by antagonistic social media and internet comments and posts by members of the RPCNA, including information from executive session at presbytery.<sup>14</sup>
- Many members do not feel that brothers are listening with charity to one another nor that the full truth is being told throughout the denomination and the public sphere.<sup>15</sup>

Bringing you up to the present, in the soil of suffering, because of love and grace, God continues to bring people to faith here and is bringing people who want to join our church family. The gospel is real here in West Lafayette, we are seeing it lived out in technicolor- extending grace, clapping our hand over our mouth, entrusting ourselves, being publicly slandered and ridiculed, having little to no brotherly support over sins committed against us as God's people by other members of the RPCNA or the presbytery or denomination. The events over the past years have shown a trajectory that the way to deal with sin in the church is through trusting in a judicial process and not trusting in the grace and gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. We wonder if this emphasis in dealing with sinners has an appearance of godliness but we believe it is

denying the power of the gospel. For this we grieve, yet we have hope- because Jesus is alive and the tomb is empty. We have been shown more grace by our Savior than we can ever extend to others and we call the RPCNA back to this grace. Please come back to the gospel. Please, do not nullify the grace of God. If you feel convicted to offer repentance- Jesus is ready to forgive. We are ready to forgive, to welcome others and move forward, relishing the grace we have been shown. The church is messy but He poured His blood for her and we ALL need His love, forgiveness, grace, discipline, compassion and guidance, and He has provided that in Jesus- to the praise of His glorious grace!

We prayerfully ask, especially those of you who are elders, as you consider our letter and all these matters, that you have the humility to consider your own ministry. You have probably faced and you will most certainly be faced with decisions in scenarios for which there is no rule book. If you are a pastor, how would you feel if decisions which you made seeking to love and serve the best you could in a tremendously nuanced situation were then brought under scrutiny and public opinion by others saying they know your motives were for evil and that you 'should' have done it differently and then rip you away from your sheep and watch as they are neglected, uncared for and unprotected and your reputation and ministry shredded in the public eye? Where is the gospel?! We long for Jesus' church to grow in wisdom for such matters as our church has faced. It won't, however, happen at the end of looking down our noses but from humility and repentance by ALL of us, knowing we would have probably done no better. This is the gospel grace we thought we would receive from our denomination, but we and our session have been met with judgment, hostility and accusations for not 'submitting' to the process. We wonder if we as a denomination are bowing at the right throne?

We love Jesus and His bride. We long to live in unity. We have tried to pursue this and will continue to be open on this end, and in the meantime- we have the gospel to live out with our church family, our neighbors and our community. We have more hurdles now to overcome in this place due to the actions of some not among us, but Jesus is alive, His Spirit is with us and His Word is powerful. What more can we ask for? The world is watching how we, the Church, live out the truths of our doctrine with one another and as Jesus prayed, "that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

These events have brought out the worst in all of us and many sheep have been wounded throughout. This ought not be in the bride for whom Christ died. Can we not ALL repent and once again witness and love and live out the grace of our Lord Jesus

Christ with ALL brothers and sisters in Christ? We know we can and it would be beautiful. While the RPCNA most assuredly believes in faithfulness to gospel doctrine, it seems we all need it not only in theory but in practice. ....*and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. 1 Thes 3:12-13.*

In Christ Jesus,  
Lay IRPC sheep

# Endnotes

1. Conversations and possible documents to verify this statement can be made available for those who pastorally desire to engage with hurting sheep.
2. Examples:
  - July 25 we upheld a congregational petition asking the Synod Judicial Commission (SJC) to communicate with us if it decided that it was compelled to require any elder to refrain from the exercise of his office to help us understand the thinking and how such an action would promote rather than hinder the work of the Spirit. This was not honored but ignored. We understand the SJC aren't legally bound to do this, but it seems to imply a spirit of dismissal.
  - Our congregation (and a number of individuals) sent another letter to the SJC on January 8, 2022 with 52 signatures outlining hurts and offenses including the removal of our pastor 4 days (Jan. 5, 2022) before the Lord's day without communication or explanation or help to us in the worship of God and receiving His Word. The SJC did not respond whether they received our letter. They responded 19 days later with a generic response that was sent to multiple parties that sent communications.
3. The Shepherding Committee made the following conclusions in their report June 10, 2021:
  - 1) we believe that all five men have repented and confessed sin
  - 2) we should receive them as brothers who have been won
  - 3) that they can still be censured
  - 4) if the censure is more than admonition or rebuke, a trial is required
  - 5) that the sins fall closer to the definition of the censure of admonition than rebukeThe Shepherding Committee recommended:
  - (1) that the five elders listed above be admonished for their lack of carefulness in their responsibilities as elders.
  - (2) that Ben and Anna Larson be approved to resume their youth responsibilities in the Presbytery.
  - (3) that a new provisional moderator be provided the Immanuel session until the Spring meeting of Presbytery.
  - (4) that the three existing provisional elders be continued.
4. Documents available upon request
5. Documents available upon request
6. The other uninvited 'victim families' received the same message as all other members of IRPC: "We ask the congregation not to drive to Kokomo expecting to attend and then to be turned away because... The commission is asking for an 'executive session...'"
7. The IRPC elders first received a draft of the PJC report only days before all presbyters received the final draft and less than a week before presbytery. They were told in the investigation that there was no intent to bring charges and it was under this pretense the men spoke. The idea of resignation was shocking when they received the report. The ruling elders did not receive enough copies for each of them to read at the same time (no electronic copy) and were told they would receive a copy of the final draft electronically before it was sent out to presbytery; this did not occur. The only discussion on the report became significantly rushed and there was not any substantive discussion particularly on the repentance/resignation recommendations. The PJC failed to bring all parties together to discuss matters, and instead laid out conclusions and recommendations of resignation=repentance and sent the report off to presbytery.
8. After the PJC had spoken for a significant time on the floor of presbytery (including an aggrieved victim family), the IRPC elders were told they would each have 3 minutes to repent in response to the report.
9. At the same time, other men graciously recused themselves from serving on or for the commission because they had received information regarding the case.
10. After believing that the work of the PJC was not good work, a complaint to Synod was sent from 51 in our congregation (April 2021). Synod took jurisdiction out of Presbytery and sent our complaints to a committee, eventually removing jurisdiction from the Great Lakes Gulf presbytery but synod never voted whether or not to sustain our complaint. The Synod Judicial Committee stated (June 2021) that the strong conclusions and approach of the PJC, "certainly gave the appearance of bias" and said, "We venture two opposing comments about 'victim-centered approaches.'" These have not been explored further. The



Synod Judicial Committee also reported: "We believe that these complaints *have* been substantiated as complaints of injustice and wrong. Specifically, the complainants have (a) alleged injustice and wrong against the lower court in their complaints, and (b) the complainants have presented a *prima facie* case of injustice and wrong and have not baldly asserted these allegations. Please note, we are not saying that GLG did commit injustice and wrong (which would be a prejudicial determination), but only that the complainants have presented a *prima facie* argument of injustice and wrong against GLG."

11. Examples:

- There was mishandling of court documents that were misread and led to a misconstrued report given to the SJC and false accusation/slander of an elder. It is still unclear if biblical repentance will take place over this sin at the time of this writing. We feel this gross mishandling displays that expertise and competency to handle such matters is in question.
- Failure to report key identities of witnesses to the commission.
- The essence of the investigators' findings were the same as the PJC but also included the initial accusations that the PJC dismissed (eg. cover-up). How is this possible without a full investigation?
- The investigators did not actively seek to speak with all the involved parties but rather passively offered to listen to whomever wanted to add to the work already done. When a witness asked why take this approach, SJC investigators said there was already much good work done and that there would be too many people to talk to. We wonder if pragmatics are ruling decisions rather than fidelity to prudence and accuracy (BoD I.1.5). At least one witness (who was the only adult present) of an incident labeled as abuse in the reports has never been contacted by any investigators.
- When witnesses expressed concerns with the work of the PJC which the Synod Judicial Committee acknowledged (eg. appearance of bias and 'victim centered approach') the concerns were dismissed due to the complaints not being substantiated. This left witnesses feeling that the priority was process over pastoral care.
- Evidential language was used in interviews with witnesses from the PJC report that neither witness testimony nor civil documentation agree with.

12. When charges were presented to the elders it became apparent that there was no possible way they could defend themselves or have a fair trial with the lack of adherence to the book of discipline and biblical principles. Knowing this, they chose for the sake of the congregation to resign. In order to explain their motion to dismiss the charges and why they believe the charges to be unbiblical, they read many of the charges (one of the few documents not found online or published by the Indy Star) to us at our private congregational meeting. The examples which follow are parts of the charges which we recall verbally read to us:

- How is our session supposed to defend against an accusation of 'inadequate urgency'? What is the standard? Where is this written and known? Is this right to hold them responsible for breaking unwritten, unknown, vague rules that a body of men get to legislate after the fact?
- How does one defend against 'Did not shepherd people appropriately?' This is vague and lacks specificity. What elder can say they have always shepherded people appropriately? Would you, elder, like to be judged this way? Would you like to be accused of not being above reproach for distrust/disunity if people leave your congregation?
- Our session is accused of withholding knowledge of confirmed and known abuse. It has not been made clear to the session what exactly this is referring to. But, another question begs answering: confirmed by whom? The PJC? Civil authorities? There is witness testimony and DCS records indicating certain 'cases' were not confirmed as abuse but were labeled as such by the PJC and pushed forward throughout the process. Here is where incompetence to determine such matters has arisen and caused harm and a professional investigation might be helpful.

- Where in Scripture or RPCNA Testimony are parents held responsible for sin committed by their children? Charges that our pastor broke the Sabbath (4th Commandment) because of sin by his child on the Sabbath is wildly unbiblical.
- How is our pastor supposed to defend himself from an accusation such as 'did not maintain a good reputation?' After being publicly slandered, how does one defend against this? Who is the audience with which he has a bad reputation? What is the reputation of those people/churches? Are they credible to evaluate reputation? How do you measure this? What is the standard?

13. Our desire is not to set up a straw man, nor distract, nor disclose others' sin but to share there are more nuances involved than most are aware. Information disclosed here is public in the Shepherding Report.

14. Documents available upon request

15. No incidents of abuse have been known to occur since the abuse was discovered by the session. The perpetrator was disciplined by the session and sentenced by the civil courts. Although the public narrative seems to indicate that our elders have failed in every way or were the perpetrators of the sexual abuse themselves, the fact is the abuse stopped from the day they were made aware of the abuse. Our session obeyed the laws of Indiana and reported all known abuse. They believed the victims and did not discourage anyone from reporting abuse. Most members of the congregation (including 'victim families') are grateful and trusting of our elders. Our session repented and have continued to be told their repentance isn't accepted nor enough and they continue to be called to repent again... we are just glad Jesus doesn't treat us this way. Accusers along the way have failed to sit down with our elders personally with the Word to show how they violated it, what the biblical path should have looked like and how to correct errors. This is a failure of gracious, biblical conduct among believers.