

1           **2023 Report of the Commission for IRPC Elder Reconciliation**

2   Dear Fathers and Brethren: The Commission appointed to oversee the work of  
3   reconciliation between the *Former Ruling Elders* (FREs) of IRPC and the persons injured  
4   from their lack of oversight reports the year began with optimism but is disappointingly  
5   now at an uncertain juncture.

6   The Commission initially let the Reconciliation Committee and the FREs work on a  
7   prescribed outline established by the Synod of 2022, beginning with a jointly agreed-upon  
8   timeline of events. The Commission viewed itself in an advisory capacity and this seemed  
9   to work. The Commission met periodically with both the Committee and the FREs to  
10   determine the status of progress. Though slow, progress appeared to be happening.  
11   The Committee and the FREs appeared to be having healthy, frank, & direct discussions.

12   In the autumn it became clear things were not going as smoothly as hoped. In December  
13   the FREs requested to meet directly with the Commission apart from the Reconciliation  
14   Committee and Mr. Keenan. The Commission agreed to this but believed it wise to also  
15   meet with the other parties separately. The FREs’ purpose for meeting seemed to be to  
16   present new information to the Commission that—it is presumed—would shift our view  
17   of the process and the work needed to be accomplished. This meeting, though amicable,  
18   did not present anything “new” to the Commission to review. The FREs also expressed  
19   some frustration with the Reconciliation Committee.

20   When we met with the Reconciliation Committee, they expressed great frustration with  
21   the position and posture of the FREs. The Committee had also been presented with the  
22   presumed “new information” and did not find that it changed their understanding of  
23   the situation. The Commission acknowledges we did not see firsthand the interactions  
24   between the Committee and the FREs, but clearly found that an impasse was present.  
25   It should also be noted that when we met with Mr. Keenan, he expressed a great amount of  
26   frustration with the methods the FREs employed and shared the Committee’s frustration.

27   To resolve the impasse and move the work of reconciliation forward, the Commission  
28   decided to get more engaged with the process. The Commission took several specific steps  
29   to foster progress:

- 30   1. Since the impasse had already created a pause on meetings between the  
31    Reconciliation Committee and the FREs, we asked the Reconciliation Committee to  
32    discontinue their efforts temporarily.
- 33   2. The Commission asked a member of the Reconciliation Committee to refrain from  
34    participation. *Note: Neither the Reconciliation Committee nor the individual*  
35    *member was required to refrain from participation, nor were ever terminated.*  
36    *This was a temporary action designed to kickstart the process.*

1 3. Mr. Bruce Backensto sent an email to the FREs sharing the previous steps that had  
2 been taken and requesting their participation to renew efforts by working directly  
3 with the Commission. This included specific steps that could be taken and the offer  
4 to meet in person. *These actions and correspondence were designed as an “olive*  
5 *branch” to the FREs with the hope they would be eager to restart the work.*

6 Following several weeks of silence from the FREs and follow-up emails from Mr. Backensto,  
7 the Commission received an email stating the FREs had obtained “counsel” and requested  
8 communication flow through their counsel. This was, and still is, quite an astounding and  
9 puzzling request. Not only was the substance of Mr. Backensto’s offer disregarded, but the  
10 Commission does also not view the injection of a third party as helpful in any way. It is neither  
11 necessary nor appropriate. The FREs are intelligent men of standing and this is not a trial.  
12 Nor do we see it as part of the scope of Synod’s instruction.

13 The FREs, for their part, have replied: (1) they believe they have accomplished everything  
14 asked of them, and (2) they remain committed to reconciliation. The Commission finds  
15 the first statement erroneous as the FREs have failed to cooperate with either the  
16 Reconciliation Committee or the Commission Synod established. The statement of  
17 “completion” is their own estimate, not that of the Commission. The second statement is  
18 one the Commission has heard on numerous occasions. The Commission finds it  
19 incongruent as they have not accomplished “everything asked of them.”

20 It is to our frustration and sorrow that matters are where they are. A year has passed and  
21 the work is mired in uncertainty. We, too, now see ourselves at an impasse with the FREs.  
22 The Commission is not blind or ignorant of possible dynamics occurring behind the  
23 scenes. The issues within the Great Lakes Gulf Presbytery and the uncertain status of  
24 IRPC certainly play a role in much of this. The Commission has sought to distance itself  
25 from these dynamics, however, and focus solely on the efforts of reconciliation. It is for  
26 the sake of those offended, the sake of the FREs biblical obligation, and the honor of  
27 Christ’s name we have attempted to keep foremost in our efforts. The Commission  
28 humbly requests Synod’s wisdom and prayer in going forward.

29 **Recommendations:**

- 30 1. That Synod affirm the process it established in 2022 and the role(s) of the  
31 Reconciliation Committee and the Commission.
- 32 2. That the Moderator of Synod appoint a replacement for Mr. Kyle Borg to the  
33 Reconciliation Committee. Mr. Borg presented his resignation from the  
34 Reconciliation Committee to the Commission in March 2023. The Commission  
35 requested he remain on the Committee until Synod 2023 finds a replacement for him.
- 36 3. The Commission sadly recommends the Moderator of Synod appoint a replacement for  
37 Mr. Tom Fisher to this Commission. Mr. Fisher has stated that his commitments do not  
38 allow him the time to continue and require him to step down from the Commission.

39 Humbly submitted: *Bruce Backensto* (chairman); *Tom Fisher* (clerk); *Kelly Moore*

1                                   **MINUTES: Synod Oversight Commission**

2                                   (Reconciliation & Restoration of Former IRPC REs)

3   **October 11, 2022.** Via Zoom teleconference. 6:01 PM. Members present: Bruce Backensto  
4 (convener), Thomas Fisher, Kelly Moore. Tom agreed to take minutes. Bruce opened in  
5 prayer and constituted the Commission meeting in the name of Jesus Christ, King and Head  
6 of the Church. We noted that the Immanuel RP Congregation held a meeting at the end of  
7 September in which it voted to leave the RPCNA. The Great Lakes-Gulf Presbytery met last  
8 week and ruled that this was not a lawful action and that IRPC remains a congregation of the  
9 RPCNA at present. The Presbytery laid out guidelines for the congregation to pursue an  
10 orderly departure from the Denomination if it is committed to doing so. There is a Presbytery  
11 committee responsible for communicating and working with the congregation. Jerry Foltz,  
12 associate pastor of 2<sup>nd</sup> RPC in Indianapolis, contacted Bruce Backensto and Tom Fisher to ask  
13 for advice; he received a request from David Carr, Ben Larson, and Keith Magill to have their  
14 church memberships transferred to 2<sup>nd</sup> RPC (they are presently members of Immanuel).  
15 His understanding is that they made this request in order to remain in the RPCNA during the  
16 restoration process, irrespective of the status of the Immanuel congregation. We discussed  
17 the situation of the former REs and noted they are continuing to meet with Rob Keenan and  
18 the investigators in pursuing the restoration process (the group is actually meeting this evening).  
19 We discussed the question of whether, in light of the fact that the congregation is still  
20 considered to be in the RPCNA, there is a need for them to transfer at this time. Bruce agreed  
21 to contact Ken de Jong to determine whether he is still prov. moderator of the IRPC session,  
22 and if so, to try to get more information on their present status. We discussed the question of  
23 whether it would be useful for us to communicate with the Presbytery &/or the reconciliation  
24 group in light of recent events. By common consent, we agreed to communicate to them the  
25 following statement: *We are encouraged by the action of the GLG Presbytery with respect to*  
26 *Immanuel RPC. We are thankful that Mr. Carr, Mr. Larson, & Mr. Magill are willing to continue*  
27 *in the reconciliation process irrespective of the final outcome of Immanuel's relationship with*  
28 *the RPCNA, and we look forward to helping facilitate the completion of their reconciliation &*  
29 *restoration. With respect to the specific question of a transfer of the three men to another*  
30 *congregation, in light of the Presbytery's action, it seems to us that it is premature for them to*  
31 *initiate a membership transfer now. In the event that the Immanuel congregation does pursue*  
32 *a transfer out of the RPCNA or become dissolved, that would seem to be the point when these*  
33 *men should either transfer memberships to another congregation or to the Presbytery's roll. If*  
34 *they are transferred to Presbytery's roll, we would urge the Presbytery to appoint someone*  
35 *(possibly, the existing Presbytery committee) who would be responsible for providing pastoral*  
36 *care to these men.* Tom agreed to communicate our thoughts on this question to Jerry Foltz.  
37 After further discussion, Kelly M. led in prayer dismissing the court at 6:59 p.m.  
38 Respectfully submitted ~ *Bruce Backensto* (moderator); *Thomas Fisher* (clerk)

1 **December 13, 2022.** Via Zoom teleconference. 4:01 PM. Members present: Bruce Backensto  
2 (convener), Thomas Fisher, Kelly Moore. Tom agreed to take minutes. Bruce opened the  
3 meeting in prayer, constituting the commission in the name of Jesus Christ, King & Head of  
4 the Church. We met informally with the reconciliation group (former REs and investigators,  
5 with assistance from Rob Keenan) in their regular Dec. 6 meeting. The meeting surfaced, for  
6 the first time, some disagreement between the two groups. The investigators appeared  
7 frustrated by the reluctance of the elders to take a position re. the fact that the IRPC Session  
8 recently (Dec. 4?) admitted Mr. Olivetti to the Lord's Supper despite the fact that his suspension  
9 from church membership privileges has not been lifted by the Synod Commission authorized  
10 to handle Mr. Olivetti's restoration. Mr. Larson expressed frustration that, as part of the  
11 reconciliation process, they are being asked to take a position re. decisions of the IRPC session  
12 despite the fact that none of the former REs have taken part in those actions. He also indicated  
13 frustration that after many months, he and the other men have not yet been permitted to  
14 begin actually communicating their desire for reconciliation to some of the offended parties.  
15 We discussed the fact that, as the position taken by the IRPC Session appears to be in direct  
16 opposition to Synod's judicial decisions regarding Mr. Olivetti, the continuance of the former  
17 REs as members of Immanuel RPC complicates, and may actually impede, the continuing  
18 work of reconciliation. It is problematic for these men to be locally overseen by a Session that  
19 is not supportive of the process established by Synod. We do not discount the relationships  
20 and ties that exist for these men at IRPC, but it is difficult to see how they can complete this  
21 process under the present circumstances. Although in October, we counseled against these  
22 men transferring their membership from IRPC to 2<sup>nd</sup> RPC of Indianapolis, we are now  
23 concerned that the problems we've observed (in the dynamics between the participants in the  
24 reconciliation group) will worsen if the former REs remain members of IRPC. The congregation  
25 geographically closest to IRPC is Lafayette. The situation is complex, as an immediate  
26 transfer to Lafayette RPC would likely engender conflict with offended parties who have  
27 moved their membership there previously. Would it be possible for them to approach  
28 aggrieved parties and begin to make peace prior to a transfer? This is not clear to us, but  
29 would need to be considered with some care before pursuing. We agree that it seems  
30 desirable, if at all possible, for them to transfer to a congregation where they could attend  
31 regularly and be cared for pastorally. We noted advice given by Julie Lowe of the Christian  
32 Counseling & Educational Foundation to the reconciliation group in a recent meeting  
33 concerning the need for those wishing to pursue reconciliation to experience a degree of  
34 brokenness over their sin before pursuing reconciliation with an offended person. We believe  
35 this Commission should be involved in ascertaining the evidence of these men's brokenness  
36 but do not think that this is something we can appropriately evaluate via a video-conf. setting.  
37 We agree there is a need for our Commission (or a min. of two of us) to travel at some point  
38 to meet with these men. We discussed an e-mail received from Ben Larson on behalf of the  
39 former REs, seeking to have a discussion with the Commission. Our consensus is that while  
40 we need to be careful not to promote or sustain a potentially adversarial interaction between  
41 the former REs and the investigators, we should be willing to meet with these men in a setting  
42 that permits them to be heard on their own. We agreed that we would like to know the topics  
43 that they wish to discuss, so Tom agreed to write and propose some meeting times to them.  
44 After further discussion, Kelly Moore led in prayer, dismissing the meeting at 4:49 p.m.  
45 Respectfully submitted ~ *Bruce Backensto* (moderator); *Thomas Fisher* (clerk)

1 **December 20, 2022.** Via Zoom teleconference. 7:03 PM. Members present: Bruce Backensto  
2 (convener), Thomas Fisher, Kelly Moore. Tom agreed to take minutes. Kelly opened the  
3 meeting in prayer, constituting the Commission in the name of Jesus Christ, King & Head of  
4 the Church. We discussed documents received from Ben Larson, sent by him on behalf of the  
5 IRPC former REs. The documents, drafted in 2021, provide some further background on the  
6 IRPC situation from the elders' point of view. As Ben indicated that they do not desire to  
7 discuss the specific details of these items, we don't anticipate spending much time on the info.  
8 We do need to give attention to the reconciliation process to which we all committed in  
9 the original agreement. The four topics that the former REs have requested for a meeting are:  
10 (1) their church membership situation; (2) remit/scope/complexity (they are concerned  
11 that their efforts at reconciliation are being combined with matters not under their control,  
12 e.g. IRPC's possible departure from the RPCNA); (3) their side of the story (provided in  
13 the aforementioned documents); and (4) how to accelerate moving toward reconciliation.  
14 We discussed these points at some length, noting that some of the concerns are intertwined;  
15 their continuance as members of IRPC also places them in an awkward situation. It may be  
16 impossible to disentangle some of these things. We do wonder whether the men have  
17 considered that if they are not comfortable accepting Jared's censure, that fact could be a  
18 considerable impediment to making peace with those they have offended, even though they  
19 are trying to focus on repenting of their own sins. We discussed various other matters,  
20 including the fact that we are unclear on the question of whether the work of completing  
21 a "*harmonized factual narrative*" of the events at IRPC has been completed by the group.  
22 As we've been willing to give the former ruling elders a chance to meet with us on their own,  
23 we should also have similar discussions with the investigators & Mr. Keenan. Tom agreed to  
24 contact Rob Keenan about meeting with us; Kelly will contact the investigators via Joseph Friedly.  
25 We plan to meet with the former REs via Zoom on December 22. We agreed to adjourn our  
26 meeting and Bruce led in prayer, adjourning the meeting at 8:02 p.m. Respectfully submitted  
27 ~ *Bruce Backensto* (moderator); *Thomas Fisher* (clerk)

28 **January 24, 2023.** Meeting via Zoom. 4:07 PM. Members present: Bruce Backensto  
29 (convener), Thomas Fisher, Kelly Moore. Tom agreed to take minutes. Kelly Moore opened  
30 the meeting in prayer, constituting the Commission in the name of Jesus Christ, King and  
31 Head of the Church. It was agreed (BCC) to appoint Bruce Backensto as moderator of this  
32 Commission & Tom Fisher as its clerk. We discussed a request from Ben Larson, who opened  
33 a Zoom account last year so the reconciliation group meetings could be conducted. He asked for  
34 permission to be reimbursed for the cost of keeping the account open. BCC, the commissioners  
35 agreed to approve reimbursing him for this expense; the clerk will let Ben know. We took up  
36 another communication from Ben Larson, informing us that Keith Magill has several  
37 extended family situations that would normally entail his involvement in funeral services.  
38 Ben asked us to give Keith permission to take part in these and to consider allowing him to  
39 baptize Ben's recently-born daughter. We discussed the fact that the 2021 SJC granted  
40 Keith's request to officiate at his daughter's wedding only on the ground that doing so was a  
41 commitment he made before his suspension had taken place. While we agree Keith is free to  
42 take part in a funeral in a non-ministerial manner, we are reluctant to make another exception  
43 to Keith's suspension since this effectively destroys the original purpose of censuring. It was  
44 MSC that we not grant this request while Keith remains under censure; the clerk will inform  
45 Ben of this response. The Commission received correspondence from Matt Wilburn regarding  
46 questions received by the IRPC Session from the investigators re. whether the congregation  
47 regards itself as being under the authority of the RPCNA. We discussed the fact that we are  
48 still trying to get an understanding of where things stand with the reconciliation process, as  
49 the group seems to have lost its earlier momentum. We do not think this is the right point to

1 involve the IRPC Session, particularly since the congregation's initial vote to leave the RPCNA  
2 was subsequently stayed by the GLGP and that Presbytery is in the midst of an attempt to  
3 work through the congregation's desire to leave. We agree that we need to become more  
4 involved in the restoration process, which seems to be stalling. Matters relating to IRPC  
5 have also become more complicated, as the Session apparently made a decision to admit  
6 Mr. Olivetti to the Lord's Supper despite the fact that his suspension from membership  
7 privileges has not been lifted. We discussed some implications of this & agreed to try to meet  
8 with the reconciliation group again; we will contact the individual participants to determine  
9 the best path forward. For a next meeting of the group, we discussed asking the investigators  
10 to identify specific examples of reconciliation parties to be addressed (e.g. Faith Counseling,  
11 Lafayette session, etc.), and ask the former REs to talk us through what they would propose  
12 to do in a given case to pursue reconciliation with a specific party. Having the former elders  
13 & investigators discuss this might be an initial way for us to understand where the process is  
14 & help it move forward. There was general agreement we need to return to the affirmations,  
15 confessions of sin, & steps to be taken that were agreed to in the original mediation document.  
16 If we can make progress on the matters that were previously confessed and the agreed-upon  
17 timeline of what took place, we hope to be able to discuss some actionable items that the  
18 former REs can begin to pursue. We need to be present going forward to observe the  
19 proceedings. It was also suggested that we empower Rob Keenan to move the group toward  
20 actionable steps. We agreed to adjourn, and Tom led in prayer, adjourning the meeting at  
21 5:26 p.m. Respectfully submitted ~ *Bruce Backensto* (moderator); *Thomas Fisher* (clerk)

22 **March 1, 2023.** Meeting via Zoom. 10:01 AM. Members present: Bruce Backensto (mod.),  
23 Thomas Fisher (clerk), Kelly Moore. Kelly opened the meeting in prayer, giving thanks for  
24 Bruce's recent medical procedure & constituting the commission in the name of Jesus Christ.  
25 The Commission minutes for Oct. 11, 2022; Dec. 13, 2022; Dec. 20, 2022; and Jan. 24, 2023  
26 were approved as corrected (BCC). BCC, we agreed that the Commission clerk is to contact  
27 Mr. Borg and Mr. Larson to request a copy of harmonized narrative of events developed by  
28 the reconciliation group, and also to ask for a copy to be given to Mr. Keenan. We discussed  
29 the proposal from the Immanuel former REs that they pursue further contact with Bob Bibby  
30 (a member of the Lafayette RPC Session), re. their repentance. In our last meeting with the  
31 reconciliation group, there were differences of understanding regarding how Mr. Bibby feels  
32 about making this contact. We agree that our Commission should remind the former REs  
33 that repentance cannot be mixed with rationalizations or excuses but must be wholehearted.  
34 We also believe it could be helpful for our moderator to reach out to Mr. Bibby and discuss  
35 the situation to understand where he stands concerning possibly meeting with the former REs.  
36 We agreed that, ideally, if Mr. Bibby is willing to meet, we would like for our moderator and  
37 Mr. Keenan to take part in any meeting between Mr. Bibby and the Immanuel former REs.  
38 Our understanding is that the GLGP will be meeting later this week & that there are a number  
39 of matters before them regarding Immanuel RPC, including the church's possible decision  
40 to depart from the RPCNA. There may be actions taken soon that will affect the former REs.  
41 We will have to see what the outcomes are as they could impact how we go forward with  
42 reconciliation and our counsel to the former ruling elders. The clerk will communicate with  
43 the investigators, Mr. Keenan, and the former ruling elders to let them know that we are still  
44 working on the next steps and will try to be back in touch soon to let them know how we would  
45 like to proceed. We will let them know that we met today, that we are looking forward to  
46 understanding what takes place at the GLG meeting, and once that is clear, we will work on  
47 plotting a path forward in pursuing reconciliation. We definitely want to see the process  
48 continue. We agreed to adjourn, and Tom led in prayer, adjourning the meeting at 10:49 a.m.  
49 Respectfully submitted ~ *Bruce Backensto* (moderator); *Thomas Fisher* (clerk)

1 **April 04, 2023.** Meeting via Zoom. 5:07 PM. Members present: Bruce Backensto (mod.),  
2 Thomas Fisher (clerk), Kelly Moore. Bruce opened the meeting in prayer and constituted the  
3 commission in the name of Jesus Christ. We took up a discussion of the current status of the  
4 reconciliation process. Kyle Borg has written to us asking to be relieved from participation in  
5 the committee working with the former REs. In recent weeks he has not been taking part in  
6 the process. We discussed the request and were inclined to ask him to remain for now as an  
7 inactive member of the committee until not later than Synod time. We anticipate offering a  
8 recommendation to this year's Synod for a replacement for Mr. Borg, to be approved by Synod.  
9 After further deliberation, we agreed (BCC) to ask Mr. Borg to continue on the committee in  
10 his current inactive state until Synod, at which time we hope to have identified someone  
11 willing to take his place on the committee. This allows him to remain available to us (and to  
12 the committee) as a resource if needed until Synod, providing some continuity. We discussed  
13 whether, and how, we should try to move forward in having the former REs attempt to begin  
14 the reconciliation process by expressing their repentance to Mr. Bibby. Our moderator  
15 reached out to Mr. Bibby seeking clarification on what his position is after his (Mr. Bibby's)  
16 conversations with Mr. Magill and Mr. Friedly, who seem to have divergent understandings  
17 of Mr. Bibby's willingness to proceed. Mr. Bibby confirmed to Bruce that the understandings  
18 of both men were compatible with the discussions he had with each of them; he indicated that  
19 he would like to have a "thumbs-up" from the Commission and committee before proceeding.  
20 The opinion of the investigators is that the former REs are not ready to proceed with contacting  
21 aggrieved parties to seek reconciliation, but Mr. Friedly has conveyed his understanding that  
22 the final decision on this belongs to the Commission. We noted that our thinking has been to  
23 have the former REs begin with the Lafayette session (starting with Mr. Bibby) in pursuit of  
24 reconciliation. We also think that the Grace Counseling ministry might be another entity that  
25 could be among the first to be approached for reconciliation. We discussed calling a meeting  
26 of the former REs, the former investigators, Mr. Keenan, and the Commission, in which we  
27 would ask the former REs to articulate for us what they intend to express (in detail) to specific  
28 aggrieved parties, beginning with Mr. Bibby and the Lafayette Session. In the best case, the  
29 commission would be able to agree on the basis of this that they're ready to speak to these  
30 parties. If so, we would anticipate a meeting that would include the former elders, Mr. Bibby,  
31 Mr. Keenan, and Mr. Backensto (and other commissioners, if possible) in which the former  
32 REs would pursue reconciliation with Mr. Bibby and then, it is hoped, the Lafayette Session.  
33 This would hopefully provide a template for taking same steps subsequently with other parties.  
34 The moderator noted he expects to be away April 26-May 18, which imposes some constraints  
35 on planning. We agreed BCC that we will call a meeting along the lines above, confirming  
36 what the former REs have to say and giving the committee the opportunity to interact in the  
37 discussion. We would know to see what the elders intend to say to specific individuals  
38 (starting with Mr. Bibby). Ideally, this will enable a path forward for us to take part with them  
39 in a discussion with Mr. Bibby. Bruce agreed to speak with Joseph Friedly & Ben Larson to give  
40 them a heads-up. In light of another commitment Mr. Backensto had, we agreed to adjourn.  
41 Tom F. led in prayer for the matter before us and adjourned the Commission meeting at  
42 6:04 p.m. Respectfully submitted ~ *Bruce Backensto* (moderator); *Thomas Fisher* (clerk)