

First, I would like to report back to Council following my comments in the last Council meeting (Dec. 16, 2024):

Since the December Council meeting, I've had two conversations with our senior pastor, at her request. You will remember that she publicly said she took as a “mandate” my concerns that growing tensions over the Enter In project are risking a fracture in the congregation – a fracture that only her ministry can address.

In our conversations, we both recognized how easy it is to fall into the error of viewing the chancel renovation simply as a facilities or construction project. It's not like a leaky roof. Simply getting a renovated chancel in place does not in itself fix anything and is not the goal. What we are doing will impact the worship practices and spiritual lives of our congregation for decades. Therefore, it needs full congregational understanding and support. As Ron Johnson's Petition demonstrates, that is what's lacking now.

I believe our Sr. Pastor is sincere in wishing to achieve that challenging goal. Even if it means reducing her own, hands-on involvement in the physical project and reaching out to congregants who are not enthusiastic about it as well as to those who are. Her ministry will be essential to the full success of this project.

I request that Council keep that same goal in mind -- full congregational understanding and support -- and conduct its own deliberations in a thoughtful manner that is consistent with that goal. Accordingly, I urge Council to set a project schedule going forward that has the intention not only to reduce tension, but also to achieve a collective vision for the renovation of the sanctuary, and a unified understanding of our overall purpose.

The following recommendations are respectfully offered to help Council meet these challenges.

Recommendation 1:

DO NOT "approve" the Project Management Committee's (PMC's) sanctuary design or allow anyone to think that it is final. This is consistent with PMC's own request (in the report given to Council today) that Council simply "accept" the chancel design. I appreciate the complicated work that has gone into producing PMC's current work product after 1 1/5 years. And I am equally impressed by PMC Chairman Terry Schmidt's candor in making sure we all know that the vote in PMC was not unanimous. Terry feels a duty to warn Council that it faces real challenges in achieving a unified vision for the chancel renovation. I submit that this also points to the potentially deepening "fracture" in the congregation that our Sr. Pastor is now beginning to address.

Instead, I request that Council:

DO go ahead with a called congregational meeting now scheduled for Feb. 22nd in response to the Petition. But do this for the purpose of: (a) updating the congregation on where things stand; (b) using PMC's most recent proposed sanctuary design to stimulate discussion; (c) soliciting more input on what members of the congregation want Plymouth to be accomplishing in this project; and (d) acknowledging and thanking PMC for its under-appreciated and almost unknown hard work. If a vote is to be taken on "the proposed modifications to the chancel" (Petition language), then:

- make it a vote on high-level concepts and trade-offs, such as the chancel more or less as is vs. a large performance platform with no chancel.

- make clear to the congregation that this is “a straw vote” to provide guidance for the PMC.
- provide assurance that the Congregation will be asked to approve final designs at a future date.

Numerous choices and decisions that PMC and the architects have had to make amount to trade-offs between conflicting goals. This meeting will be an opportunity for the congregation to learn about and review those decisions, share its preferences and opinions about them, and provide other guidance for PMC going forward.

Recommendation 2:

DO NOT ask the congregation to vote on a final, formally binding choice of specific sanctuary design, until such time as:

- the congregation is fully and meaningfully informed of the objectives and options and has a unified vision for the renovation of the sanctuary
- the Sr. Pastor states that, based on her ministry with the congregation, congregational understanding and support have been achieved, and the project can go forward without provoking disunity.

Practically speaking, this would prevent a Congregational Meeting in which Leadership lacks a clear idea of the vote’s likely outcome. Is anyone confident in the result of the vote now scheduled for Feb 22nd? The PMC vote was 43% against and 57% for the latest design. How would Leadership interpret that same result in a Congregational Meeting with, say 200 members: as a mandate to go forward, as a consensus, or as a failure of leadership? We’re already having tense discussions about exactly when to hold the meeting, whether to use voice or written ballots, and who will monitor vote counting; what

does the intensity of those discussions say about the current level of trust and unity in this church? Did Council help the Sr. Pastor lower the temperature in the room by scheduling that meeting?

Every project of this significance needs to have a clear vision and reason for the changes it may bring. Until there is a clear, easy-to-understand explanation for the proposed changes in the chancel area, we need to align on a vision before construction starts, instead of when it is finished.

Instead, I request that the Council:

DO authorize creation of a Communications Committee to work with PMC and help the congregation understand exactly what's being proposed and why, before we start construction. This Committee, if formed soon, could help organize the called Congregational Meeting (see Recommendation 1, above), currently scheduled for Feb. 22nd. They would then take responsibility for a consistent flow of information to the congregation (and Council) going forward and also for special communication initiatives to help both pastoral and lay leadership build consensus and understanding across the congregation. PMC as currently composed does not have the resources for communications work on this scale. NOTE: if these initiatives are regarded as "educational events" please recognize that members of Council and PMC would be getting educated through engagement with the congregation.

As an example of a special initiative, Susan McCarthy, head of the Plymouth History Committee stands ready to organize a photo display showing the sanctuary changes going way back; it will emphasize, she tells me, that what is being proposed today could well be the most radical change to the sanctuary in Plymouth's history. We should all know that!

DO bring in a project management consultant to work with PMC. The skill set of these professionals includes organizing documents and communications around complex projects for a variety of purposes including:

- maximize stakeholder involvement without becoming a design committee of 300 people
- clarify goals and objectives in terms that can be understood and are measurable.
- provide milestone by milestone updates to the congregation and Council
- solicit input from the congregation so all feel a sense of ownership
- clarify expectations for architects, contractors, lawyers, and such.

I'll close with this thought...

Our son recently got a masters degree in project management. To be honest, I didn't know there was such a degree or such a profession. But there sure is.

One of the foundational tasks Project Management students are taught is how to identify "core stakeholders." This typically includes individuals, groups, customers, sponsors, team members, and even regulatory bodies with an interest in a project or who are affected by a project's outcomes.

We should ask who are the core stakeholders of Plymouth Church? We have people who have invested years in the life of this church. Folks who depend on finding spiritual meaning in our music programs and worship services. Musicians and choral performers, too. All these are core stakeholders. So too, are young children who are introduced to the Christian faith when sitting around the chancel. We have stakeholders

who seek meditative experience in the sanctuary in between services or find comfort in seeing a sacred space around the chancel.

Council should do everything possible to avoid alienating any of these core stakeholder groups, and to ensure that their perspectives are included and they feel a sense of ownership in the unified vision that informs our Enter In project.