

December 17, 2015

Letter to the Aetna Congregation

From the Council

Dear Congregation,

This has been a painful time for us all, and this letter is to address the many questions you have.

On Tuesday, December 8, Classis Northern Michigan approved Council's request for what is called an "Article 17-a," which is a separation of a pastor from a church, according to CRC church order. For us as Council members, it has been an agonizing step, and one that we actively tried to avoid taking.

Many people wonder why the Council made this decision, and there are many rumors. It is frustrating for us as a Council, because so much of this process is confidential; so, people can say a lot of things and make accusations, but we, just by Christian policy, cannot respond in detail, for the sake of everyone involved.

We can say this: This process has been long. Starting in 2008, the elders began noticing problems and addressing the concerns. Even as regards the events of just this year, 2015, Council has been at work since early Spring in these serious matters. Obviously not everyone agrees with this decision, but the Council was responding to a large number of deep, serious, and long-standing frustrations in the congregation. Also, people were leaving Aetna Church, and Council was listening carefully to them, and also to others who were on the verge of leaving. We knew we could not continue on our current course.

Some say that the Council was hasty and unfair. However, we did pursue other courses of action and worked to avoid this outcome. Yet it only became more clear that the vision on the heart of the pastor for his ministry and the Council's vision of what the congregation needed and hoped for were far apart.

Nor was the Council casual about this decision. Every aspect of this deeply painful and wearying process was done in accord with CRC church order. Though the decision was ours, the process was watched over and advised by Classis Church Visitors, by the Classis Interim Committee, and by the Denomination's Pastor-Church Relations Office. The process was intensely reviewed and then approved by the Classis and by Synodical Deputies at the Classis meeting on December 8. As awful as it has been to go through this, the Council has sought to do its work humbly before God, with unanimous conviction, and with honesty and integrity.

Also, the Council has taken great care to be generous to the pastor. Although it will exhaust our budget, and will require massive financial assistance from the Classis, the Council has offered extended financial arrangements to the pastor that last twice as long as is typical in our denomination. Also, provisions for use of the parsonage have been extended to Jan. 31, and beyond that, money for other housing has been offered until the end of June, 2016. Given the pastor's health concerns, Council desired that his health insurance be paid through the end of 2016. And, his pension will be paid until June of 2016. All of these arrangements are, by every outside estimation, above and beyond the norm. Keeping these commitments will take sacrifice from all of us, and from the Classis. The Council made the arrangements for no other reason than the care of the pastor and his family.

The Council knew very clearly, with painful awareness, that by making this decision, some people would leave Aetna Church. Yet the Council also concluded that if we continued going as we were, there was no hope for the survival of our congregation.

With this letter, we have sought to carefully and appropriately address your concerns. We also are calling for the help of all who remain in the life and ministry of Aetna CRC. The future is uncertain, but we can only commit ourselves to God and His Gospel, and serve Him with glad and willing hearts. We believe God has placed many gifts in our congregation, and that there is a ministry in us that can be a blessing to the world.

We call upon you for your prayers to sustain us all, including Pastor Tuttle and his family.

We ask for your trust and support. None of us, as a Council, wanted this. We tried to avoid it. We have grieved over it. We have tried to be truthful and reasonable. In the end, however, we had a unanimous belief that this decision was right.

We call upon the congregation of Aetna CRC to an attitude of cheerfulness and faithfulness before our Lord. There has been a lot of loose accusation, discouragement, and rumor thrown around against us as a congregation. This has been hard on the good reputation of our church. We can only now move forward, shoulder- to- shoulder, with grace, dignity, and optimism, in accord with I Peter 3:8-16.

Finally, although this is a difficult and awkward time, we desire to express and share Christian grace. The Council is tentatively planning a farewell open house for Pastor Tuttle on Sunday afternoon, January 3, from 1-3 p.m., here at church.

Thank-you,

The Council of Aetna CRC