

FPCS AC/Session FAQ
October 9, 2018 Final Version

1. What is an Administrative Commission? When was the FPCS AC appointed, and who are its members?

An Administrative Commission is elected to act on behalf of the Presbytery and, if it determines that a Session cannot exercise its authority, to act as the Session (see more under question 3).

On November 17, 2015, the Presbytery appointed the following individuals to serve as members of the Administrative Commission for First Presbyterian Church of Seattle:

- Steve Aeschbacher, Ruling Elder, Bellevue Presbyterian Church, initial AC/Session co-moderator (served until his transfer from the Presbytery to take a call July 2017 at First Presbyterian Church of Ogden, UT)
- Heidi Husted Armstrong, Teaching Elder, Member-at-large, became Transitional Pastor, First Presbyterian Church Seattle, on February 16, 2016; current AC/Session co-moderator
- Shelley Dahl, Ruling Elder, University Presbyterian Church, initial AC/Session co-moderator (served until her death on August 3, 2017)
- J. P. Kang, Teaching Elder, Japanese Presbyterian Church, current AC/Session co-moderator
- Bill Longbrake, Ruling Elder, First Presbyterian Church of Seattle
- Jonathan Siehl, Teaching Elder, Honorably Retired
- Kathy Smith, Commissioned Lay Pastor, North Point Church, became Clerk of Session for First Presbyterian Church Seattle on February 16, 2016; became CLP at FPCS on January 4, 2018
- Bob Wallace, Ruling Elder, Bellevue Presbyterian Church

Subsequent to Shelley's passing and Steve's call, the AC added the following two members:

- Will Mason, Teaching Elder, Steel Lake Presbyterian Church, beginning September 20, 2017
- Ben McConaughy, Ruling Elder, Mercer Island Presbyterian Church, beginning January 16, 2018

[Please read full bios here](#)

2. Can you provide the background for your existence, and explain your charge? When did you become the Session?

The FPCS AC was duly appointed by the Presbytery to act on behalf of the Presbytery, as any AC would be. When the FPCS AC assumed original jurisdiction on February 16, 2016, it became the Session of FPCS. Under our polity, the AC is empowered, as is the Session of any of our member churches, to exercise authority in the management and disposal of church assets for the prayerful living out of the Kingdom of God. We are doing the job we were appointed to do, humbly and prayerfully.

The FPCS AC/Session has invested thousands of hours over the last 3 years on issues related to the congregation, the property, and the lawsuit, and all other issues related to Seattle First. This breadth and depth of this investment of time and resources is best captured in the following reports. Please take the time to read through these reports to fully understand the background and context for how the Presbytery came to appoint the FPCS AC/Session.

[AC Report for First Presbyterian Church of Seattle](#)

[AC Report Appendix](#)

[First Supplemental Report of the FPCS Administrative Commission](#)

[FPCS AC/Session Report \(Background and Motion on FPCS Property, July 17, 2018 Presbytery Meeting\)](#)

[For all other reports and updates, please see the FPCS AC/Session page on the Presbytery's website](#)

3. When did the former Session of Seattle First first decide to sell/redevelop its property?

Plans to redevelop the property had been talked about since the 1990s, less than 30 years after the sanctuary was rebuilt (1969). However, the Session of Seattle First officially petitioned the Presbytery to sell *all* of its property (1 $\frac{3}{4}$ blocks) in order to redevelop a $\frac{1}{4}$ of a block of the property in 2007. At that time, the property was too large and expensive for the congregation to maintain. In 1987, Seattle First had 788 members; however, in 2007 it had 145 members, a decline of 81% -- the sharpest membership decline of any church in Seattle Presbytery over that same period.

4. Why is the FPCS AC/Session now selling the entire FPCS property? Why was the decision made not to stay with the original Joint Venture Option plan to keep a portion of the property for the church?

In 2014, with the Presbytery's approval, the former Session entered into a Joint Venture Option (JVO) redevelopment plan in which it agreed to sell both its north parking lot and the entire church site, in exchange for the option to develop a new church building on one quarter of the current church site. The JVO also included some retail space and 50 parking stalls. After 4 years of work on this JVO, the developer abandoned its option in December 2017. All told, Seattle Presbytery and Seattle First put in a total of twelve years on the redevelopment plan, and in the end the developer chose not to proceed with the plan. The FPCS AC/Session determined that the potential of putting together another JVO, a massive and complicated undertaking, was neither feasible nor in the best long-term stewardship interest of the ministry. The existing structures are obsolete and the cost of maintaining them is prohibitive, so any new endeavor will require new facilities.

We are investigating a new ministry presence on or near the First Hill/Capitol Hill area.

5. What about the current congregation – aren't you displacing them?

As stated above, the FPCS congregation has been a congregation in decline for *decades*. In addition, the schism caused by the former leadership was a blow to the congregation's sustainability. A small remnant of members remains, however, with a lively, rotating group of non-member attenders regularly joining us for worship (homeless, tourists, neighbors). While we believe the FPCS congregation may find a way forward, we are certain it is not dependent on this building, and that a new, more creative approach to being church is needed. The FPCS AC/Session has never discussed plans to close the congregation.

6. Did you consider inviting other churches in the Presbytery to use the property, giving the property to another Presbyterian church, or leasing to non-profits?

Seattle First has in fact has done this for many years now, sharing its space with other churches and non-profits, including Community Church of Seattle (Hyungjae), Persian Ministries, Bakke Graduate University, Path From Poverty (formerly Women's Enterprises International), and Seattle Classical Christian School, among others. This has never been sustainable.

FPCS AC/Session maintains the entire 131,027 square foot campus of Seattle First Presbyterian Church. This entire block property features a 1,100 person sanctuary, a 160 person chapel, a 200 person hall, a 26,000 sf Christian Education building, an 11,000 sf basement hall, and about 50 parking spots at this First Hill location. In addition to its own church use, Seattle First currently shares the remaining space with four other entities: Seattle Presbytery, Compass Housing, JTM Construction, and Turner Construction. Despite renting out this additional space to 2 non-profits and 2 commercial tenants, the FPCS AC/Session barely breaks even on its budget.

There are many barriers to the FPCS property being a viable location for another congregation, the most notable being cost, parking, and capital improvements. Due to its size, it would take an additional \$400,000 to cover the annual operation of the Seattle First campus (this is in addition to a church's current ministry budget). Without the north parking lot for revenue and Sunday church use, there is not enough parking to facilitate daily use of the building, let alone for Sunday worship. Add to this the cost of maintenance and capital improvements on an outdated building with no energy efficiencies, and the additional annual cost to utilize the building could easily become more than \$500,000 to \$600,000 a year when you factor in capital improvements.

We believe it makes better stewardship sense to use the proceeds from the sale to pursue a continuing ministry at another location on or near First Hill or Capitol Hill, and to devote the rest of the funds to the redevelopment of many of our congregations.

7. Why hasn't Presbytery been given more voice in this process? Why is the FPCS AC/Session in such a hurry to sell?

The Presbytery *has* been given voice all along, having:

1. Elected the Task Force to review the original FPCS redevelopment proposal (November 2007);
2. Elected to create the Property Redevelopment Committee (January 2009), which approved the process to receive development proposals;
3. Elected to make that Property Redevelopment Committee the Property Redevelopment AC (November 2012);
4. Approved the sale and JVO through the Property Redevelopment AC (June 2014);
5. Elected to form the Committee on Special Administrative Review (July 21, 2015);
6. Elected to form the FPCS AC (November 17, 2015); and
7. Approved the FPCS AC's recommendation to sell the property unencumbered (July 17, 2018).

The Presbytery has, by its numerous affirmative votes, expressed its approval of and trust in the leadership of FPCS, including the present AC/Session.

There has been no undue haste or delay in this process.

8. Why didn't the FPCS AC/Session take more time to decide about selling the property?

We did take our time. The FPCS Administrative Commission has been charged with working closely with property issues since it began in late 2015. After the congregational issues became more clear, we had to look at other options. This has been a Session discussion for the past three years, at every meeting. We have prayerfully concluded that with a 20 member congregation, the church as it is is not sustainable. We are trying to be good stewards, acting without undue haste or undue delay.

9. What about Compass at First Presbyterian – aren't you displacing those experiencing homelessness once again? How are you addressing homelessness?

Throughout the years, Seattle First has been involved in ministry to the homeless. It was important to the FPCS/Session to continue the best of what Seattle First has been by partnering with Compass Housing to bring a 100-bed, 24-7 shelter into Campbell Hall. Compass applied for and received a grant from the City of Seattle to cover 18 months' operation of a shelter with the option to renew. There was full disclosure to the City of Seattle and Compass from the beginning about the limited availability of Campbell Hall due to the terms of the JVO (which was active at the time). We have good relationships with Compass staff and Compass guests; we care for them, and will do our best to care for them through any changes that come, including being open to partnering with them at another Presbytery property. It's possible that even with the sale of the property, the Compass shelter could continue for at least another couple years.

10. How are you addressing gentrification and the current housing crisis in Seattle?

The issues of gentrification and housing are complex and should not be oversimplified into rigid moral categories and responses. This is not for the FPCS AC/Session or Presbytery to answer

or solve alone; our Presbyterian conversation and response needs to be in conjunction with the larger Seattle community. The Presbytery does have the time and opportunity to address these questions going forward as it relates to its properties on Beacon Hill and Capitol Hill and in Kent. In fact, there have already been discussions with community developers about affordable housing developments on these sites.

The choice (as we see it) is not between selling the property and hurting poor people or keeping it and helping them; rather, it is a question of how we can best steward the property for ministry, which includes helping the poor, and not just downtown but across the region.

11. What is your response that by selling the FPCS property you are abandoning ministry downtown, and will never regain a foothold again?

We are not abandoning ministry downtown. We are investigating a new ministry presence on or near the First Hill/Capitol Hill area. Better stewardship of the FPCS property will free us to explore and support new models of ministry downtown and elsewhere.

In addition, there are several Presbyterian congregations or properties less than five miles from FPCS (Capitol Hill .8 mile [sanctuary holds 500 people, and has parking space]; Union 1.1 miles; Madrona Grace 2.1 miles; Japanese 2.5 miles; Bethany 3.5 miles; Queen Anne 3.8 miles; Mt. Baker Park 3.9 miles; Wallingford 4.7 miles; University 4.8 miles; Magnolia 5 miles).

12. Isn't this transaction an indication that FPCS AC/Session is just using property for profit, and does that really further the Kingdom of God?

It is true that the property in question has a significant monetary value in today's economy. The question before the FPCS AC/Session, however, is whether the facility is capable of serving the congregation as currently constituted. In the view of the FPCS AC/Session, it is not. Rather than holding on to a physical property that is vastly oversized and expensive to maintain, the FPCS AC/Session believes that it is wiser stewardship to use the property to create monetary assets that can be used to do the work of the Kingdom.

13. Doesn't this transaction for profit make us just like a commercial entity?

We are not a commercial entity, although in this case we hold an asset with commercial value. But the choice is not between profit and ministry. Indeed, the FPCS AC/Session will utilize the proceeds of sale solely to further the ministry of Jesus. This transaction has the potential to create a financial legacy that in and of itself will further the dreams and visions of the founders of FPCS. That legacy can be used to shore up the ministries of our churches that need help, and also provide for grants and investments in addressing a broad range of social and missional issues like homelessness, gentrification, and racism. The choice is not between holding the property and doing ministry. The conclusion that the FPCS/AC Session has reached is that creating a financial asset will create opportunities for vastly more effective, sustainable and far-reaching ministry.

14. One argument for not selling is that the land is sacred, dedicated to ministry, and it would be immoral to sell. What is your view on this?

Land has *potential* to be a tool for ministry, but like any tool, its positive or negative value results from the way in which it is wielded. And as with tools, using the right tool at the right time can make all the difference in finishing a job well; conversely, using the wrong tool or using a tool in the wrong way usually leads to wasted effort and even damage. Land can be, like a sacrament, an ordinary substance that becomes a vehicle for God's grace, but in and of itself land has no special properties or powers. For a broader survey of the biblical treatment of land/ground/earth, [please click here](#).

15. Can the property even be sold when there is litigation still going on?

The trial court concluded that the members of the FPCS AC/Session appointed by Seattle Presbytery are the rightful governors of First Presbyterian Church of Seattle and that they have full authority to act on behalf of the true church. In addition, the trial court held that FPCS property is held in trust for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Although the former co-pastors and six former members of the Session have appealed the trial court's judgment, the Washington Supreme Court has rejected their request for direct review, and the trial court's judgment has not been stayed while their appeal proceeds. As a result, the FPCS AC/Session has authority to act in the same way as any other Session seeking to steward church resources.

16. What is your response to members of Presbytery who want to open up this decision to sell the property to everyone's input, or want Presbytery to shape the larger vision for the use of the proceeds?

The FPCS AC/Session is following our church's polity and process. The decision to sell the property rests with the Seattle AC/Session, which has sought and received the Presbytery's approval. Like the Session of any other congregation, the FPCS AC/Session is responsible for making decisions about congregational assets.

With respect to how the proceeds of assets are used and for what long-term purposes, the FPCS AC/Session desires the Presbytery's input. We look forward to that conversation.

Indeed, the larger conversation of a Presbytery vision for congregational revitalization and church planting is an important one. And, in fact, the Presbytery has been pursuing a conversation related to congregational redevelopment and recently received a grant from the Presbyterian Foundation to do it.

It's essential the Presbytery have deeper conversations about revitalization and redevelopment. Committees and commissions are for normal course of business. We can continue to have forums related to that question, meet with Sessions and have conversations about stewardship, resources, and develop plans for revitalization.

We note that the most recent new church developments (Union by UPC, North Point by CKPC) were started in churches, not by the Presbytery. The Presbytery effectively stopped driving new

church development in the early 90s when it became clear that these attempts were falling flat. If we want the Presbytery to engage again in new church development, it will take all of our churches thinking creatively and being willing to take risks to move into the future with renewed health and vitality. There will be more opportunities to talk about vision in the future, and the Presbytery welcomes that input.

17. How does Presbytery steward its assets related to property?

In 2011, the Presbytery approved a policy related to property that states:

The Executive Board, upon recommendation from its appropriate committee, shall recommend any transfer of property (sale, purchase, or lease longer than five years) to the Presbytery for a vote. Net proceeds (amounts above all maintenance, investment and costs of sale) from any sale of Presbytery property shall be placed in a reserve account held for the furtherance of the Presbytery's mission and ministry. The Executive Board is responsible for making recommendations to Presbytery for the use of reserve account funds. Any use of reserve account funds requires a majority vote of Presbytery. (approved September 20, 2011) (G-4.0201)

In 2014, the Presbytery began a grant program from these proceeds which has already yielded many benefits to our congregations.

Read: [Presbytery property and finance: Where we've been and where we are going](#)

18. Is there a plan for what to do with the proceeds from the sale of FPCS?

The proceeds belong to and will be stewarded by FPCS to investigate a new ministry presence on or near the First Hill/Capitol Hill area. What is not required for that purpose will be used for mission and ministry in Seattle Presbytery.