

# Southwood

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

January 25, 2012

Dear members and friends of Southwood,

This is an emotional time at Southwood. We are certain that even receiving another letter from the Session will raise the anxiety level for some of you about your church. We hope this letter not only answers some questions, but also concludes by giving you freedom in the Gospel to cast that anxiety, concern and fear on Christ and rest in the truth that Southwood, as the bride of Christ, is being sanctified corporately as each of us is being sanctified individually.

We the Session sent you a letter, dated January 19, 2012, announcing a called congregational meeting for this coming Sunday, January 29, for the purpose of voting regarding Jean Larroux remaining as our Senior Pastor. Several significant developments have taken place since that letter was mailed that have caused your Session to *cancel the congregational meeting* and instead use that time to communicate clearly the change of events and begin to answer some of the questions many of you have voiced over the past several weeks. The remainder of this letter will hopefully begin to flesh out those developments and serve as a beginning point of understanding as we move forward.

As you know, we called the congregational meeting after two months of regular, almost bi-weekly meetings of the Session where we attempted to reach a consensus on the myriad of issues brought before us by some of our members and generated from within the membership of the Session. Those two months were preceded by many other months where we navigated similar issues but with lower stakes and less intensity. Ultimately, the most significant issue of disagreement among members of the Session was our ability or inability to support the leadership of our Senior Pastor. As you read previously in the letter dated January 19, 2012, we made several definitive statements about Jean Larroux's character, personality and fiscal management. We also referenced multiple affirmative rulings of higher courts regarding his personal theological views. Despite the previous adoption of those statements and our acknowledgement of those rulings, we were still unable to 'close ranks' on the issue of support for our Senior Pastor.

Advised by multiple sources, we pursued the only course of action left at our disposal. The Stated Clerk of the General Assembly starkly summarized for us that there were only three options available to a church in our predicament: 1) Close ranks on the issues; 2) Have the Senior Pastor resign; or 3) Have the dissenting Elders resign. The Stated Clerk advised that because those three options seemed disagreeable to us at that time we were left with only one option: *appeal to the court*

1000 Carl T. Jones Dr. • Huntsville, AL 35802  
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who elected both the Senior Pastor and the Elders and ask them to vote. At that time the congregational meeting was called.

As we made preparations for that meeting, the Session felt it was important to speak with one voice and advise the church regarding this meeting. Our Session voted on Wednesday, January 18, 2012, in support of Jean F. Larroux, III, and advised the church to *vote against the motion* to dissolve the relationship and in favor of retaining our Senior Pastor. The language used to communicate that was that a 'clear and decisive' majority of the Session voted in this manner. We will address that language in a subsequent paragraph. Following the distribution of that letter to the church, a Session meeting was called for Monday, January 23, 2012, for the purpose of refining the details of the Session's participation in the congregational meeting and any further communication, if any, that might go out prior to the meeting.

Jean Larroux was called to go out of town on Friday, January 20, 2012, to attend to his mother who was critically ill. She had an aneurism repaired on Thursday, January 19, but experienced multiple complications. She had stabilized by late Friday allowing him to remain through worship on Sunday, January 22, 2012. He left immediately following the worship services to attend to his mother who had been placed on a ventilator and was diagnosed with acute kidney failure. At the time of *this* letter, she remains on a ventilator and Jean remains with her on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. He had planned to electronically attend the Session meeting on Monday, January 23, but due to an additional emergency surgery he was absent from the entire meeting.

At that Session meeting on Monday, January 23, 2012, seven of our Ruling Elders tendered their resignation in writing. These resignations were received by the clerk of the Session at that meeting. The reasons for their resignations are summarized later in this letter, but the action of these seven Elders significantly changed the overall percentage of support for our Senior Pastor within the Session. The same members who had supported Jean previously continued to do so, but the seven Ruling Elders who resigned were the same Elders who did not feel they could 'close ranks' in support of Jean. Although the resignations themselves were unexpected by the other members of the Session, the de-facto implications of their actions resulted in a Session who is unanimous<sup>1</sup> in its support for Jean Larroux remaining as our Senior Pastor. This statement is not meant to minimize the seriousness and weight of these resignations, but rather to acknowledge the obvious implications of their decision. With corporate agreement on the issue of our support for Jean Larroux, we now believe we can move forward in addressing other concerns either by way of affirmation regarding previous decisions or adjustments that may be made to those decisions. The ability to support and stand behind the leadership of our Senior Pastor was the *most significant point of disagreement on the Session* and the only catalyst for calling the vote at a Congregational meeting. With that inter-Sessional issue resolved, we felt no compulsion to further pursue the formal congregational meeting.

Prior to those resignations, two other sources encouraged the Session not to pursue the vote on Sunday, January 29, 2012. Several weeks ago the Session asked the Providence Presbytery Care Committee to come alongside us for input, counsel

<sup>1</sup>This was established by a secret ballot vote on Wednesday, January 25, 2012 to allow each man in all integrity to indicate his support of Jean Larroux and endorsement of the use of this word.

and care as we continued looking to Christ for clear direction moving forward. This Committee rendered some preliminary recommendations to the Session late on Monday afternoon prior to the meeting where the resignations occurred. Several significant points about a variety of issues were made by the committee, and the chairman indicated their feelings about the congregational meeting were unanimous. They urged that the called Congregational meeting to dissolve the relationship between Jean Larroux and the church was “premature” and should be delayed until further input could be given.

A second appeal came to the Session from Jack Duncan, a congregational member and Deacon who presented a request from several congregation members to delay the upcoming congregational vote. Let there be no mistake about this: *even in light of the appeal from Jack Duncan and the Care Committee, the majority of the Session felt it would be improper to delay the vote yet again.* There was deep angst among Session members as to whether delaying this vote might result in more division and more conflict than proceeding with the meeting might cause. In many ways we were faced with a choice between two very difficult and unattractive options. Following the resignations and further urging from the chairman of the Presbytery Care Committee to delay a formal vote, we felt that canceling the meeting at this juncture was prudent.<sup>2</sup>

With regard to the reasons for the resignations of the seven Ruling Elders, only those particular men would be able to provide first-hand rationale for you, but we felt a big picture overview would be helpful. Following the Sessional vote to support Jean Larroux, there was much talk both within and outside of the Session about the possibility of a ‘minority report’ being issued to the church. Many of you have understood that the final catalyst for the resignations was a refusal by the majority of the Session to allow the publication or promotion of a Southwood-endorsed minority viewpoint prior to the meeting. At this point in the life of Southwood and in the history of this situation, the more accurate and complete information that you receive, the better. Proverbs 18:17 says that the first to give their side in an argument seems right, until another comes forward. Biblically we are urged always to consider all the information available before making definitive judgments. We hope that the following information aids you in following that Biblical enjoyment.

Before speaking about a “minority report” we must first speak to the existence and make-up of the minority. There has been significant misinformation about just exactly how “big” or how “small” the minority and majority votes were on the Session. The Sessional vote that was communicated to you as “clear and decisive” was a secret ballot vote of 12-5 in favor of Jean Larroux with one abstention. Following that vote, a member of the Session who voted in the minority suggested that we keep the exact numbers of the vote secret and simply say that the vote was ‘overwhelming’ in favor of Jean Larroux. We felt such language was prejudicial against the minority. The words ‘clear and decisive’ were chosen in order to be charitable; one member of the minority and one member of the majority made that choice. To clear up any confusion: the result of the vote was a 70% majority counted in favor of Jean Larroux and 30% against. We continue to feel that the words “clear

<sup>2</sup> According to the opinion of the Stated Clerk of the PCA, Dr. L. Roy Taylor, rendered Tuesday, January 24, 2012, we are not allowed to change the purpose of the meeting within 7 days of that meeting, but we are (because this was a Session-called congregational meeting) allowed to cancel the meeting.

and decisive” were an accurate representation of our vote. It must be noted that these results reflect the votes of all elders *except* the two men who were absent from the meeting the night the vote was taken and Jean himself. Those two other men were among those who resigned Monday night. The support percentages of your Session prior to these resignations *would have been* 12 in support of Jean Larroux, 7 in favor of dissolution and 1 abstaining. If these numbers were counted during an official vote, this would *still be* a 63 percent majority in favor of Jean Larroux.<sup>3</sup>

Monday night a motion was made by a member of the minority requesting permission to give the entire church a Southwood-endorsed “minority report.” With regard to any “minority report” or something similar, you should know the following: in the PCA minority and majority reports are only given by committees who are reporting minority and majority opinions to a court prior to the final vote of a court. Your Session is one such court. Because your court, the Session, actually voted and ruled in favor of Jean Larroux, then the result of that vote is the only official opinion of the court. After the vote is taken, there is only *one opinion* of the court. That opinion is the majority decision determined by that particular vote; no minority decision or opinion exists. The motion to send a Southwood-endorsed “minority report” was voted down for these reasons.

The Session’s decision not to support a so-called “minority report” was not a punitive attempt to silence minority opinions, but rather a decision to act in accord with our polity and lead the church in the same direction in which God is leading your Session. Additionally, as we have seen over the past months, your need to have your Session speak clearly and decisively is monumental. We felt there was no more important moment for us to communicate to you the decisive will of your Session than the moment when the relationship with our Senior Pastor was the question before us. The dissenting elders were fully informed of the Session’s intention to propose a forum at the congregational meeting for the expression of dissenting opinions. In order to free their consciences, these elders were also encouraged to freely express their dissenting opinions *as individual members* of the congregation both before and during that meeting. Because the only official decision of your Session was in support of our Senior Pastor, there were no ‘official’ caveats to that decision. In our vows as Elders, we promise ‘subjection to our brethren in the Lord,’ and for this reason when a final decision of the court is made, it is *the* final decision of the court. There are no proper minority decisions or representative minority opinions. This is not to ‘censor’ opinions, but rather to provide a unified corporate expression of the vows each man has taken and an understanding that a final decision on a motion before the court is precisely that – *a final decision* of the court. Personally, some of you may be curious as to why some men would vote to dissolve the pastoral relationship with Jean Larroux. We would encourage you to speak directly with those men who hold those dissenting views. The men who previously served on the Session and hold these views are men of honor, still bound by their ordination vows to speak only to truth and facts in this matter. These men are

<sup>3</sup> It must be noted that while some in the church have expressed an opinion that the Teaching Elder votes should not have been counted in these votes, such inferences go against our polity, serve to create division and find no warrant whatsoever in the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in America. Our four teaching Elders who are associate pastors were duly elected, ordained and installed with the same authority and responsibility to deliberate, discuss and rule in matters before our court as any of the Ruling Elders at Southwood were.

reliable sources for that personal information who will not speak with slander, conjecture or rumor. Their opinions are important and as such please seek them out if you wish to hear those particular opinions for yourself. <sup>4</sup>

Regarding the resignations of the dissenting Elders, the following should be noted. At the moment when the majority of your Session voted to uphold the previous decision of the court, to remain committed to officially communicating only the unified position of the Session to support Jean Larroux, and to forego any Southwood-endorsed correspondence of a minority opinion for the reasons stated above, the Elders who resigned immediately indicated their intention to do so and each man officially submitted his resignation to the Clerk, some at that time and some at the conclusion of the meeting. Those resignations were acted upon during a called meeting of the Session on Wednesday, January 25, 2012, and a commission was formed to confirm the decision of each man in accordance with BCO 24-7 and officially dissolve the relationship. You should know that the motion to do so included a statement of thanksgiving and appreciation for their years of service as well as a desire to see them continue to partner with us in the Gospel at Southwood. We have a deep desire to see these men remain at Southwood as brothers in the Lord. There is filial love and affection although there has been deep disagreement on the court.

Because the most significant issue of disagreement among the Session was our support of our Senior Pastor and because our disagreement was the catalyst for our decision to call the congregational meeting and because that issue is now resolved, we determined by necessary implication to cancel the congregational meeting on Sunday and not call for a congregational vote on this issue. We will have an open Session meeting during that time period instead. While we still believe, as we stated previously, *“that God has the right man here at precisely the right time in the life of our church,”* we also know that there are many unanswered questions. Because the schedule for Sunday had already been significantly adjusted, we will keep the time slots as previously indicated but use the time previously set aside to begin to rebuild trust and answer some of your questions as best as we are able at this time. Some of the topics we plan to address on Sunday are as follows: 1) Additional clarity regarding this letter and events leading up to this Sunday’s meeting, 2) Sessional plans to move forward and rebuild trust, including open Session meetings, Presbytery Care Committee assistance, and congregational communication and feedback, 3) Financial realities, budgetary concerns and plans to address, 4) Specific plans for addressing the “myriad of issues” raised by the congregation, and 5) Season of prayer for repentance, healing, and peace.

It would be an understatement to suggest this is an unprecedented time in the history of Southwood. We are fully aware that our actions have eroded confidence with some of you, but even though this may be the case, we did not feel that the risk of jeopardizing your confidence would justify a continued pursuit of a course of action that we now deem inadvisable for the sake of “saving face.” We are committed to doing the right thing with honesty, transparency and integrity. We hope the candor of this letter portrays that to

<sup>4</sup>The resigning Elders were John Bise, Keith Denton, Crawford Dillon, Wayne Parker, Kirby Parks, Kriss Preston and Skeets Simonis.

you. We humbly ask God for his wisdom and hand in guiding our leadership in seeking the “purity, peace, unity and edification”<sup>5</sup> of his church at Southwood.

The road ahead is difficult, but clearly worth the effort. We hope to reach peace through unifying the church. Due to the reduction in tithing, we face difficult decisions that will affect our staff, missions, and ministries. Many of you may already have heard the Session authorized a letter to our missionaries preparing them for these uncertainties. Our staff members have also been apprised of the need for significant reductions to meet these budgetary realities. We’ll begin to provide more clarity on these issues Sunday, but please know that not one single reduction in giving, staff or ministry will be done without significant prayer and heartfelt grief for the immediate implications.

To reiterate, our schedule for this Sunday will remain the same: one worship service at 9 a.m., followed by an open Session meeting in the Sanctuary at 10:15 ending by Noon. There will be *no requirement for registration* for attending this meeting. *All are invited and encouraged to attend this meeting, regardless of membership status.* Lord willing, Jean intends to be present both to preach and to lead this meeting on Sunday.

Let us close by saying we understand this announcement will cause great relief for some and great consternation and frustration for others. As there will likely be much speculation about the “real story,” let us be abundantly clear: this letter was not intended merely to communicate the blunt truth about what is happening but to assure you that there is no “spin” in this message. Situations like this can hardly be sterilized. This is the *real* story. It is messy and it is something we hope will not be repeated. Conflict in the church often causes great consternation in the community because there is a misperception that the church is where the “good” people go. The truth is precisely the opposite. Churches are where “bad” people go to find someone better than themselves, Jesus. If we ever needed to remember that we have a good, perfect and *present* Savior it is now.

If your friends and neighbors ask you, “What is happening at Southwood?”, then candidly tell them the truth. Tell them that it is messy. Tell them it is not fixed yet and tell them that we are hurting. Ask them to pray for us. Tell them we *need* it and then tell them this: if you were ever looking for a place where you could go to church with a messy marriage, kids who weren’t fixed and problems that hadn’t been neatly solved, then we have just the place for them; it is called Southwood. This is the perfect time to join us. We’re accepting new sinners daily. Jesus told us that there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous men who have no need of repentance. That is true of churches, too! We have great need of repentance and a Savior who rejoices in a people who will do so. God is at work. Please be in prayer for this meeting, our leadership, our congregation, our staff, our missionaries and our community.

God Bless,

The Southwood Presbyterian Church Session

<sup>5</sup> Book of Church Order 24-6, Officer ordination vows, question #6