

Introduction

To begin, this letter is a product of a two-hour meeting that was initiated and led by staff, not administration. During this meeting, we read scripture, prayed, and sought wisdom about how best to approach this situation.

The staff of Christ Chapel Academy wishes to share our heart with the school community regarding the recent events impacting our school. We want to provide background information that will help all of us move forward with transparency about these events.

In order to preface the importance of moving together with unity and purpose, if you are not aware, the school is entering into its re-accreditation process in just a few months. If we fail accreditation, we are unsure of what that will mean for our continued success as a school and representation among colleges that look at our graduates' degrees, having come from an accredited school. There are serious implications with potential loss of staff, students being withdrawn and lack of leadership to complete our accreditation review.

Background on Church-School Relationship

First, we acknowledge that the relationship between the church and school is beneficial to everyone. The school has a place to operate, and the church has a potential ministry avenue to reach families and children. Throughout the years, the school has operated with a degree of autonomy. The head of school is directly hired by the board of elders. The school's budget is separate, with advisory and oversight from the board of elders who approve it each year.

Over the last several years, Pastor Bob has met with Mrs. Burnette to discuss the school and church budgets. During these meetings (and others like them), it became clear to Mrs. Burnette that Pastor Bob was seeking more funds from the school to offset costs relating to the church.

This disagreement over policy control and a proposed increase in "rent" led Mrs. Burnette to resign. In a meeting with staff, Pastor Bob informed us that he did not know why Mrs. Burnette resigned, but simply stated "she was not in alignment with the vision of Christ Chapel church." When pressed for an explanation of this misalignment, Pastor Bob referred to two areas of concern: finances and policy changes. The high level view: Pastor Bob feels the school should be paying more in "rent" and wants to re-write the policy manual to gain greater control of the day-to-day operations of the school.

Financial Concerns

Here is what we can share with you regarding the finances:

1. Building Utilization Fee

- We are the only ministry at Christ Chapel church that pays to use the building. The school pays rent (although Pastor Bob's wording is "building utilization fee") of \$625,000 annually. This amount covers the mortgage on the property and operating expenses, with a surplus amount.
- In a meeting with staff, Pastor Bob told us that this number has not been addressed in 20 years. He has hired firms to determine the rental value of the property and similar properties in the area to justify an increase in this "building utilization fee." It is the staff's position that this demonstrates Pastor Bob's desire to lead from a business mindset rather than a ministry mindset.
- In the same meeting, Pastor Bob acknowledged that there were items previously included in the \$625,000 that the church no longer covers. Some examples include: the contracts for cleaning and maintenance were cut, and snow removal is no longer a covered item. The school has had to cover those expenses outside of the \$625,000. In other words, while the \$625,000 has not increased, the covered expenses were reduced. It is our position that when including these additional expenses, we have already been paying an effective increase in rent.

2. Proposed Budget Increase

- Pastor Bob has budgeted an increase from \$625,000 (which already covers mortgage, expenses, and surplus) to \$825,000. The explanation given was to balance the church's budget.
- Pastor Bob stated that the school's current tuition rate already provides a "buffer" or "savings" of approximately \$250,000 yearly. He said that the school could "easily absorb this cost without raising tuition." However, this does not account for changes in staffing, adding new programs, or upgrading essential items like books, computers, etc.
- This is not a future impact. It affects us now. As a direct result of this budget increase, we currently lack sufficient funds to purchase all of the curriculum we wanted to update for students.

- The challenging aspect of this shift is that Pastor Bob desires the \$825,000 to increase annually. The escalation clause is based on tuition revenue. As tuition is increased, the church will receive more funds.

3. Tuition Discounts

- School staff receives a 25% discount on tuition for their children. In contrast, the church's pastoral staff receives a 50% discount on tuition, with the other 50% being paid by the church budget. We believe this is another example of the church benefiting from the school without transparency about all the benefits the school provides to the church.

4. COVID Relief Funds

- The school received money through the "Employee Retention Credit" (ERC) program for businesses that remained open during COVID-19 and continued to pay employees. Over the years, the money saved from this program has generated interest. A gift from the school to the church of \$100,000 was proposed. However, it is our staff's understanding that this \$100,000 will be included as an "annual gift" and treated as such for the purposes of balancing the church's budget.
- The COVID-19 relief funds were used for building improvements. The new playground, gym, and bathrooms exemplify the school using funds for this purpose. However, there are other projects that the school contributed to that were supposed to be "covered expenses." For example, the school paid for \$250,000 of the parking lot replacement and \$130,000 of the costs for a new roof. We recognize the shared nature of the spaces we occupy and have gladly invested back into the facility we utilize.
- It grieved the staff to learn that Pastor Bob sent a letter to the Christ Chapel church community, using these building improvements as a demonstration of where their tithe and offering dollars are being spent. As one staff member expressed, "these events lead us to believe that the school has a ministry called the church, not the church having a ministry called a school."

5. Stewardship Concerns

- The school strives to be a good steward of the money it receives from tuition. The staff share in the continued mission of the school by being frugal in our spending and operating with a posture of need versus want. The staff asked Pastor Bob to address the apparent contrast in spending

values between the church and school. One staff member asked about the updates to the church facilities, such as the screens in the sanctuary. Pastor Bob told us that the money spent on these upgrades (\$500,000) was necessary to fulfill his mandate from the church elders that hired him. He said he was given the mission to "reach younger people." He informed us with a matter-of-fact tone that there has been a 25% turnover in the congregation since his arrival. In that moment, there was no expression of sadness regarding the sheep that had left the flock of the church, only a business-like calculation that "these things are to be expected."

In summary, we hope you can see that we are uncertain how a \$200,000 increase in rent, a recurring annual gift, and other budget shifts will be used by the church, except to help balance its budget.

The staff have prayed for Pastor Bob's leadership, understanding that this is his first church as lead pastor. We wish to provide grace in all matters. However, in our meeting with Pastor Bob, the staff was left with the impression that his call for unity would only be realized when the school aligns with his vision, for more control over school policy and increasing control over the school's finances.

Pastor Bob was clear to us: "Each month, I receive a report that shows the church has \$1,000,000 in the bank... We are completely solvent as a church and doing well." If this is accurate, the staff is confused about why these financial shifts are necessary in the first place.

Policy Concerns

Here is what we can share about other policy changes:

A few months ago, a qualified candidate for upper school principal withdrew from consideration after meeting with Pastor Bob and church staff. The church entered into a contract with Jobfitmatters, a Connecticut-based head-hunting company, to help find an upper school principal. This action was outside of current policy since the church's oversight of school administration has only ever been to hire a head of school.

The partners of the firm met privately with the church and school staff. What we are sharing with you are our first-hand experiences. The church staff shared with this company that they desired to have a "Pastor of Education" to better align with the "vision of the church" and provide "unity in areas of disunity." When pressed about those areas, the agency confirmed the same issues that Pastor Bob brought up: finances and policy. When questioned about the rent increase, the head-hunter confidently said, "These challenges happen all the time. The answer is to raise tuition and give the

church what it wants. It is for the sake of unity." To be clear, we do not believe we should face a tuition increase in the future solely to provide more money for the church's budget.

The company representative also indicated that the church's Pastor wanted more oversight into the day-to-day operations of the school. We should think of this process as "Dr. Griffith being the head of the church and school, and the principal working under him." In this explanation, Pastor Bob would effectively be the head of school. We do not understand why this additional oversight is needed, given how well the school is performing. The only conclusion we can draw is that this is about greater control over finances and hiring/firing of staff.

Conclusion and Path Forward

Mrs. Burnette has stated that she wants to return as Head of School for the next 8-10 years. The staff are requesting policy changes to ensure that she is allowed to continue operating as head of school under the school board's direction and not be subject to threats of dismissal for advocating for the needs of Academy staff and families.

The staff asked Pastor Bob to reach out to Mrs. Burnette in a spirit of reconciliation and work on the necessary policy changes that would ensure the continued success of the school. As of the writing of this letter, no such conversation has taken place.

Pastor Bob told staff that he respected Mrs. Burnette's desire to leave because no one should stay when they no longer align with "vision" (policy and financial changes). This places staff in a scenario in which our alignment agrees with Mrs. Burnette and calls into question what we should do in response.

We have tried to keep this message focused on facts rather than feelings. However, we want to express our love for you all. We have taken your trust as a high calling to do well with your children's academic and spiritual heritage. We have a heart to remain. Some staff have committed to return while others are observing the process to determine God's calling. However, it is the overwhelming opinion of staff that if Mrs. Burnette's resignation is not allowed to be withdrawn along with the necessary changes implemented for her continued viability as head of school, many staff will begin the prayerful process of considering what God would have them do for the future.

Further, IF no reconciliation can be reached between Mrs. Burnette and the elders, the staff desires that the interim head of school be a combined position held by Mr. David Dawdy and Dr. Heidi Lane. The only way to achieve peace during this process is to have people of integrity and a full understanding of the school's policies and procedures.

We are hopeful that this town hall will produce a better feeling of peace about the future.

—

Respectfully and prayerfully submitted,

The *unified* staff of Christ Chapel Academy