On July 1st *The Layman Online* published an article reporting on the recent Peace River Presbytery decision to lease the First Presbyterian Church Punta Gorda property back to the dismissed congregation for four years at $1 per year. In addition, the presbytery agreed to release all assets not affixed to the property to the congregation.

There were a number of misleading statements made in the article that need to be corrected for the record:

1) The article sets a context in which it sounds as if the presbytery was unresponsive, stonewalling and barreling towards a foregone conclusion from the very start. Within that framework it states that a vote for dismissal of the congregation was “pushed into 2013 at a November 2012 presbytery meeting when the Administrative Commission requested an extension.” The fact is that the Session of FPC Punta Gorda requested that extension. The reason it asked for it was because it did not want to hold the congregational meeting to vote on dismissal until 2013. In SW Florida many congregations have members who do not return from the north until after Christmas, making January through April the busiest time of the church year. Although we realized that this request was for the purpose of insuring the critical mass necessary for achieving a super-majority in the final vote for dismissal, the A.C. agreed that the best scenario was to allow the congregation to hold its vote at that point in the year when they did have most of their membership available.

2) The request to allow the Session to vote on dismissal in early 2013 instead of the fall of 2012 delayed the entire process. After a congregation votes for dismissal there are a number of steps that need to be taken in terms of assessing all the ecclesiastical and property records of the church. The simple fact was that following a January congregational meeting there simply was not enough time for the A.C. to complete the required business by a February presbytery meeting. The dismissal request was, however, before us, and it was necessary for the A.C. and the presbytery to act on that request in an expeditious manner.

3) The statement in the article that the church suffered damage as a result of Hurricane Donna in 1960, although perhaps true (yet unknown to us), is misleading. First Presbyterian Church was devastated by Hurricane Charley in 2004 and was able to rebuild because of the thousands upon thousands of dollars granted to the congregation by Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and many other PC(USA) congregations. *The Layman* article conveniently fails to mention this. There were many presbyters at both the February 28 and May 23 meetings of presbytery who remembered the outstanding support given to First Presbyterian Church by their own congregations during this difficult and challenging time in its life and ministry. Additionally, given this history of denominational and presbytery support, the A.C. was greatly surprised when it was reported to us by the Session that it had discontinued wind and hail insurance relatively soon after rebuilding because of the cost for the amount of the deductible. It seemed strange to us that after receiving the kind of faithful support it did from Presbyterian brothers and sisters in the past that the leadership of the church would gamble in such a way in a part of the nation where protecting our properties from hurricane damage simply goes without saying.

4) When an A.C. is appointed by a presbytery to a task, it has in accordance with the Book of Order the authority of the presbytery. Upon our appointment, we met with the Session of FPC and unanimously agreed that an action to assume original jurisdiction was neither warranted nor necessary. With that we continued our work, met with the Session on occasion and kept in touch with church leadership as necessary and appropriate. Throughout the process we were honest about the fact that it was our responsibility to not only continue dialogue with them, but to also have conversation with other Presbytery of Peace River entities as well as local PC(USA) congregations. When we reported to the Session our decision on the recommendation
we would make about property to the presbytery, we were honest in telling them that there were many different opinions and concerns about the disposition of the property presbytery-wide. In light of this reality, we did not feel that sufficient time had passed for us to determine what final disposition of the property should be. At the time we were recommending a two-year window for leasing the property, and then later at the May 23 presbytery meeting we unanimously agreed that four years was a better window before it finally came to the floor for an amended vote adding the extra two years.

5) At the time we first informed the Session of our decision to retain the property, and in all subsequent communications with FPC, we were absolutely clear that we felt the possibility of the congregation completing the leasing period and being able to negotiate for the property was alive and well. *The Layman* article also conveniently failed to mention that with a clear record of five years of significant membership decline it was necessary for the A.C. to address the issue of congregational viability for future years. As I personally told the FPC Session: If dismissal was a move that helped them to thrive, we would be more than happy to assist their ministry with a willingness to talk about property in the future. But especially because of the PC(USA)'s significant contributions and efforts in their regard, we also needed to practice faithful stewardship, be faithful to the whole presbytery, and make sure that this property would continue to serve the ministry of Jesus Christ in the many years ahead. Finally, it should be pointed out that when initially informed about the recommendation we would make, there were ruling elders in the room who told us they felt that this decision was a genuine moving of the Holy Spirit.

6) At a follow-up meeting with the Session attended by Alan Penick and myself, Alan clearly pointed out that it would be necessary for the A.C. to take action in order to transfer the title of the deed for the real property to Peace River Presbytery. Rev. Mock is simply wrong when he states that they had heard nothing about this. We told them this had to be done prior to any action taking place. In consultation with the Presbytery trustees and legal counsel, we learned it could be done one of two ways: 1) call a congregational meeting of the remnant and effect the transfer; or, 2) with the authority of the presbytery of jurisdiction, dissolve the corporation, reincorporate and transfer the deed to the presbytery. Since option #2 would have been costly in time and money for both FPC and the Presbytery of Peace River, we elected to exercise option #1. This also gave the faithful remnant, who chose to remain in the PC(USA), a chance to have a voice and vote in the final decision.

7) Finally, the Session of FPC Punta Gorda knows that the A.C. was doing everything in its power to help its congregation continue to be in ministry at its present location for future time to come and yet be faithful to ecclesiastical process. By stating that the A.C. decision was the means by which the Presbytery of Peace River was sending a message to other churches in the presbytery, Rev. Mock has taken the final step in breaking genuine and honest fellowship with his Christian brothers and sisters. We deeply regret that.

Respectfully Submitted,

Rev. Dr. Jeffrey DeYoe, Former Moderator
FPC Punta Gorda Administrative Commission
Presbytery of Peace River