

**WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
**Grand Rapids, Michigan**  
**Adult Faith Formation Team Proposal**  
**Rev. Jen Porter, M.Div.; Kyle Nolan, M.Div.**

We are grateful for the opportunity to share our proposal for an integrated, team approach to Adult Faith Formation at Westminster. In this document we have sought to focus on how we will fulfill the expectations of the MAFF job description, and on the ways that sharing these ministry responsibilities make use of our particular gifts. We affirm the wisdom of the committee's approach to the question of adult spiritual growth through the lens of *faith formation* rather than education alone. We believe the complementary gifts, skills and personalities we bring to this task will produce a holistic, well-rounded approach to faith formation in the life of the church. And we contend that this ministry will be enriched by Jen's involvement in pastoral care as well as Kyle's in missions.

A central goal of this position is to coordinate a range of resources and opportunities around a progressive approach to the Bible, Reformed theology, and lifelong formation supported by our personal practices. Of course, faith and theology are forged in conversation with scripture and experiences both individual and communal. Our aim would be to provide Westminster's congregants with entry points to engagement at any point on their spiritual journey and opportunities for growth in any stage of life.

We see enormous value in the two and a half years we have each spent at Westminster learning the particular heart and voice of this congregation. Our experience provides unique insight into the promise as well as the challenges facing Westminster in the years ahead. It also lends an awareness of how a carefully developed faith formation approach can support the flourishing of all of the church's ministries.

Furthermore, in describing our strengths and passions as complementary, we mean this in a strong sense. For example, where Jen brings training and experience in nonviolent communication and restorative circles that can aid us in the midst of conflict, Kyle brings substantial study and a keen interest in the theological resources and conceptions of justice that frame such work in a Christian context. And where Jen brings relationships and experience with adults and younger families in the congregation, Kyle brings the same with respect to young adults and parents of youth.

This new attention to faith formation represents a significant shift in the life of the congregation. Our first priority will be to identify key leaders and to join them in envisioning a ministry that uniquely suits Westminster's identity. As we identify the assets and longings that already exist within the congregation, our specific expression of faith formation will emerge from the concrete interests, gifts and desires that are among us.

Our common commitment to spiritual direction as a source of growth and transformation is at the heart of our vision for this new ministry. This holds tremendous promise in the lives of individuals as well as in the common life of the congregation. We believe that knowing oneself is vital to being there for others, and that it is reasonable to expect that our leaders have an engaged and maturing faith. Our role would be to provide the environment and resources to cultivate this growth.

In the following proposal, we aim to distinguish between the primary areas to which each of us would attend, though we recognize that doing so runs up against the limitations of our language and the integrated character of our lives. So when we say that Kyle will focus on theology and Jen will focus on spiritual disciplines, for example, we do not suppose that theology can be neatly separated from spiritual disciplines or vice versa. But identifying areas of focus does help us clarify the ways in which our respective strengths and interests differ and align in order to determine when it is appropriate for one of us to take the lead and for the other to offer support.

Finally, we hope that this proposal spurs further conversation, excitement, and discernment around adult faith formation at Westminster, and we look forward to being a part of that conversation.

## **Adult Faith Formation Detail Proposal**

The attached team description describes the delegated and shared responsibilities covered by the Adult Faith Formation Team in general. Here we will further interpret these responsibilities in detail.

### **Structure and Accountability:**

As Associate Pastor for Adult Faith Formation and Pastoral Care, Jen would lead this team and be responsible for administration and budgeting, along with maintaining the unity of the vision of the Adult Faith Formation ministry and Westminster's overarching vision and mission.

As Minister for Faith Formation and Mission, Kyle would provide support to Jen in administration and budgeting, as well as the maintenance of the ministry's mission and vision, while seeking support and guidance for new faith formation initiatives.

Both will serve as staff resources to the Spiritual Life and Learning Committee, and Kyle will continue his service to the Young Adult Ministry of WPC, further developing and expanding the ministry.

As Senior Pastor and Head of Staff, Chandler Stokes would support this team in a similar role that he provides to the Mission and Pastoral Care teams. As has been the case for those teams, the Adult Faith Formation Team will benefit from multiple staff perspectives working to incorporate the values of faith formation across our whole system.

### **Sketch of Responsibilities**

*The following headings will describe what the apportionment of responsibilities according to faith formation theme might look like in the context of this proposal. In each of these cases, leadership refers not to autonomy, but to relative focus in the context of mutual support.*

#### ***Associate Pastor for Faith Formation and Pastoral Care***

Jen's role will provide leadership ensuring a range of opportunities for adults of all ages to engage in personal and communal formation. She will lead the Adult Faith Formation team in coordinating spiritual formation across all life stages and among family systems. As God's Spirit is always present and ready to transform us, she will offer leadership as we notice what God is doing in and around us, what God is calling us to and how we integrate our worship, our learning, our serving and our experiencing God into all aspects of our lives. She will encourage every member of Westminster to ask, what's next in my spiritual growth, what is God calling me to now?

In coordination with the team's overall work toward growth in biblical and theological understanding, Jen will pay particular attention to spiritual disciplines and small group

experiences. Her role will be to foster a deepening sense of connection in community within the context of faith formation, as people participate in classes, retreats, and small groups. She will identify, train and support leaders from the congregation in these areas and will be responsible for ensuring the facilitation of small group cohorts in response to the interests and needs discerned by the community.

Jen's presence within pastoral care provides a natural connection in our integrating spiritual formation across all aspects of our lives. Pastoral care occurs in the context of formation and with aspects of spiritual direction. This care fosters relationship and builds understanding on where individuals find themselves in their faith formation. Particularly, Jen's continued involvement with Westminster Presbyterian Adults will allow her to incorporate spiritual formation within that ministry.

Jen's leadership with the deacon ministry serves as an example the vision of formation within ministries where individuals are already connected and serving. During the three years of their term, the ministry of deacons invites individuals into spiritual reflection and personal growth in their own communication and listening, in self-care and boundaries, in understanding of mental health, and in confidence in offering prayer and scripture.

### ***Minister for Faith Formation and Mission***

Kyle will provide leadership with respect to opportunities in theological and biblical education for adults. At a general level, this means that he will be the person primarily responsible for asking how we are supporting theological learning and reflection across our programming, and how our various ministries are consistent with and formative for our theological identity.

His specific responsibilities will include, but are not limited to: teaching classes, selecting and reviewing curriculum, identifying, training, and resourcing leadership for related initiatives, arranging for outside speakers and ensuring that on-site educational events are appropriately staffed and supported. In all areas of responsibility, he will attend to the demand for a Reformed, progressive, contextual, and critical approach to theology and Scripture.

Kyle's role on the mission team and support of mission committees will provide a natural link to support the integration of mission and education. As a result, his role will include initiating, supporting, and implementing free-standing opportunities for learning as they relate to the mission of the church, as well as making sure that end-to-end opportunities for reflection and learning are provided in the context of both long and short-term mission experiences.

Kyle will also take the lead with populations in the church he's served in the past at Westminster. He will continue to lead young adult ministries, working to increase participation and create opportunities for members and visitors who haven't been attracted by Westminster's past young adult events and activities. And in cooperation with the Minister for Youth and Their Families, he will spearhead the development of initiatives for parents of youth from 6th to 12th grade in support of a "family-based" approach to youth ministry and in service to parents as they

foster the faith formation of their adolescent children.

***Jen's Personal Statement:***

Listening to the development of this Adult Faith Formation position, I had no intention of seeking to shift my focus. On the night that the initial search committee shared with session, it struck me that this focus on how adults are being formed as they participate in the life of our congregation matters deeply to me. They shared their personal perspectives and their own longing for formation, along with what they have seen and heard in our congregation. Much of what they said matched impulses that I carried with me into seminary. I wanted to be formed in ways that were beyond what I had found in the congregations that I had been part of. I wanted more biblically, theologically and spiritually. As we learned new spiritual practices, many of my classmates also said, "where have all these practices of faith been and why haven't we been introduced to them in our churches?" I believe that it is crucial that adults experience meaningful spiritual formation within God's church.

Meanwhile, this fall I led the women's retreat and as I did I had sense of deep fulfillment and energy and call. I was invited to lead a Sunday morning session on the same topic. Again, deep fulfillment, energy and sense of doing something that felt really right. It was a place in ministry where I could easily be me and do what I do. In February, I led another session on spiritual practices. Knowing the initial search committee's experience together in contemplative prayer, I invited a few of them to come and share. After one of those conversations, I hung up the phone and thought for the first time- that's exactly what I would like to do. A few hours later, I shared the idea that became this proposal with Chandler and Dave.

What I care about most in ministry is people being whole and being free to live, and our learning to pay attention to the Holy Spirit and to step into new things. I care about transformation and about all the ways we can open ourselves to knowing who we are and what God is calling us to be. I care about people being intentional in their growth in Christ. I care about what God is doing in the life of every soul...what she needs next...what he is longing for. I care about spiritual practices that can help us listen and can open us to the very presence of God. I want to help people listen to their souls and learn to speak about their faith, to grow in comfort and confidence and to do so with community. I care about the gifts of the Spirit and the power of God all around us. I believe that the kingdom of God is right here and much of the work of our spiritual formation is our learning to pay attention.

As I look back, I see this thread back in seminary in a desire to be trained in spiritual direction so that I could bring that into the church and into ministry. I see this as I look at the books on the shelves in my office. I see this in my recent training in non-violent communication and restorative circles. I see this in my approach to so many aspects of ministry up to this point. I see this in my undergrad degree in education.

Over the past weeks, I have wrestled with the idea of making this shift. This is not a small task. There are particular challenges starting new things within a congregation, learning what works and doesn't, holding layers of expectation loosely and taking it one first bit at a time. This could

be, should be, a significant change for our congregation. But for me, there is a sense of call to this work and this proposal was compelling enough to my soul to speak it out loud. I get excited thinking about focusing more specifically on spiritual formation. The gifts of my brother Kyle, and his passions combining with mine, is unique and interesting and quite well-rounded. So, God be with you all as you listen deeply and as you discern together. May we disappear and may God speak and lead us into this vision.

***Kyle's Personal Statement:***

As Minister to Youth and Their Families at Westminster, I've been afforded opportunities to lead a variety of the church's ministries to all generations. In my role, I've worked alongside and supported Elders, parents, and volunteers who serve as the hands and feet of the youth ministry.

And in other cases, I've been asked to take the lead in ministries directly for adults. Writing the Session's statement in affirmation of the Black Lives Matter movement and leading intergenerational conversations about racial justice have been highlights of my time here. Leading the current programming for Emerging Westminster has led me to a deep investment in the future of the church's young adult ministries. Participating in the team that wrote the new Vision and Mission last spring gave me profound hope for the course the church has set for itself. And perhaps my most rewarding experience in this vein has been leading an adult education class during Lent on the life and theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. There I experienced first-hand the hunger in the congregation for thick, contextualized, theological engagement.

In all these opportunities, I have been able to serve at the heart of Westminster's ministries, offering my gifts and energy to the larger church and bringing youth into some of its most salient conversations. And I've come to realize that my gifts, talents, and passions in ministry reach their fullest expression when I can participate in the faith formation of adults.

So as the conversation around Adult Faith Formation at Westminster gained momentum over the course of the past year, I sought to discern what role I might play in turning the vision generated by members of the present and past search committees into reality. I was interested in the work from the beginning, and have increasingly begun to see the wisdom in the suggestion that this work be carried out by a team with complementary strengths and passions.

My education and aptitudes in scripture, theology, and philosophy are strengths I bring to this work. They've prepared me not simply to educate, but to reflect at a high level on the cultural forces affecting the church as well. As a result, the approach I would seek to bring to adult faith formation would not focus primarily on creating new programming—though it would be an obvious and necessary component—but would involve a serious consideration of how our structures, methods, systems, practices, and vocabulary themselves form and even *deform* our lives and faith.

This might sound overly intellectualized, but I care about this aspect of the work deeply because of an awareness that the often imperceptible cultural forces that surround us are rarely benign.

They have significant but sometimes-unacknowledged impacts on our hopes, our desires, our understanding of the common good and our sense of belonging and orientation within our communities. When we seek to understand and respond to these forces in our worship, service, and study, we are positioned to better understand and give an answer for the hope that lies within us.

My experience working with Ministry Architects and their systems-based approach to youth ministry has prepared me to facilitate the creation of a similarly sustainable architecture for the adult faith formation ministry, to support the continued development of the youth ministry and children's ministry, and to encourage the integration of all these ministries under Westminster's broader vision and mission.

Finally, my current enrollment in a Spiritual Direction program at the Dominican Center at Marywood will increase my skill set in service of the church, provide me with a connection to a network of spiritual directors, and will further extend my ability to equip and support leaders within the church and help them discern where their formation might best feed into the formation of others.

In this past year, I've grown increasingly aware of the need for a more robust culture of faith formation for adults at Westminster, and for a shared vocabulary that would speak to the sacredness of each individual and family's calling as part of the larger community of faith. Listening to parents who long to better engage their sons and daughters in conversations about God, faith, and their daily lives, along with youth leaders who sometimes feel ill-equipped to instruct young people in our wide and deep faith tradition has convinced me that adult education and formation is the lynchpin in securing the future vibrancy of Westminster's witness.

Jen and I share these concerns and passions. We share a love for this church. And we hope you will see the ways that our interests and skills can serve the church in a profound and comprehensive way. Thank you for your consideration.