

5 Points & 3 Sets of Questions

A Response to Skillman's Town Hall Meeting by John Mark Davidson

Hello sisters and brothers of Skillman, John Mark Davidson here. I hope this message finds you well. Just wanted to send a quick document out to clarify and answer some of the questions I've received since the presentation. I would have loved to have this conversation in person, but I feel the structure and imposed time limitations at the townhall meeting robbed us of the opportunity to have an open and honest discussion about what the many possibilities could be for Skillman.

We have been told that we only have two options... the Hills or Skillman exactly the way it is now... and that is not true. We missed an incredible opportunity as a church to sit down in the same room, hear each other, talk to each other, learn from each other, and collectively and creatively think of a path forward where different values and preferences are honored and respected. Instead, most of us were only given two minutes to speak. On top of that, the person who spoke the most at the Skillman town hall meeting isn't even a member of Skillman Church of Christ. Why was this the case? Whose idea was this? I found myself bewildered. Why so much control? Why so few options?

The Hills have had multiple opportunities to share their vision to the church. They have had multiple Sunday sermons, interest nights, Bible Classes, Q&A sessions, and a field trip. All these I have supported because I want this church to make an informed decision about all the possibilities. Very little space, platform, or opportunity has been given by church leadership for people who have concerns, questions, and envision something different. No space has been provided to collectively imagine together the many possibilities.

We were given 15 minutes at the town hall. 15 minutes. At first, we were told we had 30 minutes, but days before the meeting, I was informed that due to time constraints I could only have 15 minutes.

How can you share months of discussions and brainstorming, in just 15 minutes? We were required to submit all our information ahead of time so that it could be approved. Even though there was a team of us working on the project, I was told I was the only one who could speak. We chose video because of the time constraints and thought it could convey the most amount of information in the shortest amount of time. Our strategy was to stay focused on possibilities, practicalities, and potential. We wanted to take the high road, and because 15 minutes is not a lot of time to talk about a very complex issue, we hoped we could ignite a spark and invite us all into a less-binary way of thinking and seeing. We believe this could, and should be a full body participatory conversation and time of prayer, contemplation, and action.

We came in thinking it was going to be an opportunity where varying perspectives would have the opportunity to share their thoughts, hopes, dreams and concerns. To me, the environment seemed very controlled and preset in one direction. For example, I did not know there was going to be a rebuttal. It was not communicated nor was it on the agenda. I found myself

disappointed...that coveted time, although brief, was used to both compliment and discredit me and straw man the proposal. This is not about me. My hope is that we can all see this about something much bigger than any of us individually.

Some of the things he said in the rebuttal were not true, they were inaccurate, and were misleading. If you were there, you saw me get up, walk to the front and ask if I could respond to the rebuttal to clarify the misleading statements but I was told I could no longer speak. We only had 15 minutes and had no time to clarify or answer any questions. For this reason, I want to clarify a few things as best I can in this format. To do this I have 5 points and to conclude 3 groups of questions.

1. FIRST – There is a plan. And we would love for more people to participate in this plan.

- In addition to the video, Mark Prude had prepared a 5-page document with a very detailed description of next steps for Skillman. The plan was to disperse this document as a compliment to the video to give a more step-by-step, tangible go-forward plan. Mark sent in the proposal to Jake at 5:05pm, Tuesday, and missed the 2pm deadline by a few hours. Because it didn't arrive by the 2pm deadline, it was not allowed to be presented or dispersed at the town hall meeting. Are they afraid of the dispersal of information? Is the church not capable of making a decision with all the information presented?
- There is a plan. There is a lot to be excited about. We couldn't share it all in 15 minutes. Even in this short video, I can't do justice to Mark's document, but I encourage you to reach out to Mark if you want to know more and he can share with you.

2. SECONDLY, this isn't 'John Mark's plan.'

- I was surprised that many of the comments were about me directly. Just to be clear, it's never been about me, so I wish I would have emphasized this point, that this isn't MY plan. The move-forward plan isn't the John Mark plan. Sure, I've got some ideas and dreams, but the PLAN is to as a church come up with OUR plan. In addition, there are expert spiritual mentors, teachers, and church-planters that would love to assist us along the journey. This isn't 3 people making a decision for the whole church, this is making space and creating opportunities as a church to collectively walk down a path of discernment and imagine the possibilities. Perhaps we need to reevaluate the operating system. This process has been very elder driven and directed. May we appreciate all the time and energy that they have given. It is also true that as a larger church body, there has been little opportunity to gather together to talk, dream, and make decisions on how to move forward.

3. THIRDLY - This move-forward plan includes the CDC. It is preposterous to imagine a future of Skillman without honoring, including, and supporting the CDC. In the

Lakewood Advocate article, it said that the only thing the two sides agree on is how awesome the CDC is. I believe this to be true. We want the CDC to continue to thrive. Any accusation that a move-forward plan would not include the CDC is false and inaccurate.

4. FOURTHLY - This is a plan that honors our ministers and gives them a seat at the table. When I resigned as a minister from Skillman, my desire was to continue to be an advocate and supporter of our ministers. They are each amazing people who have been working hard through many challenges. Being a minister comes with great privileges and challenges. At Skillman, too often they have been excluded from conversations, uninvited to meetings, and disrespected as human beings. When I worked at Skillman I saw such great potential, and Jake and I were truly excited and had dreams, ideas and proposals. We knew our ideas had some shortcomings but part of our dream was for an opportunity to engage with others in this discussion. This dream was not reciprocated by several elders. I resigned partly because I realized that in this model, as a minister I was just middle management.. a hired hand. I felt I couldn't do much if the leadership of the church was unwilling to engage in this way. I felt too boxed in trying to operate within a very closed system of leadership that proved to be highly dysfunctional.
5. FINALLY, the magazine. I didn't get a chance to communicate this at the town hall, but the magazine is all hypothetical. It is meant to paint a picture of something that could be at Skillman. This might be 2 or 3 years down the road. The real contents of the actual magazine would be as a result of the Skillman church coming together and setting a plan then inviting our neighbors to participate. No need to pay attention to the names, dates or times. It is simply an example of some ideas that could manifest through the journey of discernment together as a community of faith.

3 Sets of Questions...

1. What is preventing us from dreaming as a church? Some feel all is lost, but my point is we haven't tried as a collective to set a vision together. Why have those in charge been hesitant to give space for other alternatives?
2. If there is a faction of the Skillman Church of Christ that wants to dream, that wants to engage in this discussion, why can't we give it a shot? If people want to go to the Hills, that option is available to them already, but if there are people within this community at Skillman who are open to and have a desire to envision a new future, why can't they be given the opportunity?
3. What is all this teaching us? Is this an invitation? What can we gain from suffering and longing? Will we allow this to teach us? Will we be open to transformation?

May we find our unity in love. May we honor what has been, what is, and what will be for both Skillman and the Hills. May any bullying, threats, efforts to control, manipulate and diminish cease to exist amongst us and may we be known by our love.

My Aunt Cecilia Morgan, who is one of my personal heroes, is for the Hills merger. I have the utmost respect for her. I choose to respect and honor her decision. We had lunch the other day, and we both shared and listened to one another. We respectfully agreed to disagree. We also agree that whatever happens, we will continue to love each other.

Peace and love,
John Mark Davidson