

Presbytery of Great Rivers Adopted June 7, 2011
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DIALOGUE, DISCERNMENT AND RECONCILIATION POLICY

Introduction

The Presbyterian Church has never been without controversy. From the major split of the denomination at the time of the Civil War in this country to the minor skirmishes that break out within congregations from time to time, we have been a people not afraid to take stands. In the history of the Presbyterian Church in Illinois, a great controversy broke out in the 1830's and 1840's. It was a controversy over slavery. The issue was not whether slavery was in and of itself a good or bad institution. Instead the heated discussions and votes at presbytery and synod meetings were over ordination standards. "Could a person who has ever owned a slave be ordained to any office?" Former slave holders and ardent abolitionists found themselves seated together in morning worship and at presbytery meetings. Congregations decided about their denominational loyalty based on their convictions about this issue.

"The mutual interconnection of the church through its councils (sessions, presbyteries, synods and General Assembly) is a sign of the unity of the church. Congregations of the PCUSA while possessing all the gifts necessary to be the church, are nonetheless not sufficient in themselves to be the church. Rather, they are called to share with others, both within and beyond the congregation, the task of bearing witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the world." G-3.0101 nFog. This mutual interconnection is the strength of the PCUSA and other denominations. From time to time, individual congregations may, for one reason or another, believe that they can no longer be a part of this interconnectedness and may decide to affiliate with another Reformed denomination or to otherwise sever their ties with the PCUSA. This policy is designed to aid in the decision-making of the congregation and the Presbytery of Great Rivers in such a circumstance.

"The purpose of discipline is to honor God by making clear the significance of membership in the body of Christ; to preserve the purity of the church by nourishing the individual within the life of the believing community; to achieve justice compassion for all participants involved; to correct or restrain and wrongdoing in order to bring members to repentance and restoration; to uphold the dignity of those who have been harmed by disciplinary offenses; to restore the unity of the church by removing the causes of discord and division; and to secure the just, speedy, and economical determination of proceedings." (D-1.0101) This reminder from the Rules of Discipline is at the heart of this policy as well.

Guiding Principle

John 13:34-35. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." The Presbytery of Great Rivers will be guided in any discussions with congregations seeking to leave the Presbyterian Church USA by this one overriding principle: That the witness to Jesus Christ in the way we conduct our mission and ministry will not be diminished by the way it interacts with its congregations, their pastors, their sessions and their members.

"All ministry in the Church is a gift from Jesus Christ. Members and officers alike serve mutually under the mandate of Christ who is the chief minister of all. His ministry is the basis of all ministries; the standard for all offices is the pattern of the one who came "not to be served but to serve." G-6.0101; Matthew 20:28

Process

1. When a session has determined that there is a need for discussion with the presbytery, the session will vote to invite a listening team to meet with them. The team will be composed of three people representing the presbytery and will be appointed by the Moderator of the presbytery, the COM chair, the Administration Chair, the Visioning Chair and the General Presbyter. It will be the intention of this group to find people who have special training in mediation, coaching and the like. At the invitation of

the Session the Listening Team may meet with the congregation, various groups in the congregation as it fulfills its task. The purpose of the listening team will be as follows:

- A. to hear concerns;
 - B. to determine if reconciliation without separation should be attempted and recommend steps toward that end;
 - C. to determine an initial degree of support for leaving and for those desiring to stay in PCUSA;
 - D. and with the Session determine a need for a Discernment/Resolution Team.
2. After meeting with the Listening Team, the Session may request the appointment of a Discernment/Resolution Team. This team shall be composed of the three listening team members along with three members of the congregation to be appointed by the session. One of these members should represent those members of the congregation who are not interested in leaving the PCUSA (if any). The purpose of the Discernment Team is as follows:
- A. to discern God's will for this congregation in one of the following ways
 1. to move towards transfer to another Reformed denomination.
 2. to divide the congregation.
 3. to close the congregation and form new congregations
 4. to individually transfer members to other congregations
 5. to pastorally care for those who desire to remain in the denomination;
 6. In considering whether the Presbytery will transfer a congregation to another Reformed Denomination or will dissolve the congregation and reach an agreement with the new independent congregation or a new congregation of another denomination the presbytery will examine each proposed denomination as it presents itself.
 - B. to develop an education/discernment process for the whole congregation concerning their decision;
 - C. to develop a pastoral care plan for all members and staff through the transition;
 - D. to develop a process for Congregational action to request Presbytery action; this process will include two meetings of the congregation, the first meeting will be to approve the plan, the second to request dismissal or dissolution according to the plan. Presbytery action on the plan will take place between the two meetings.
 - E. to negotiate practical considerations for the action. (property, capital funds, any future bequests or beneficiary designations, consideration of payments to the denomination, preservation of church records for the denomination and the congregation including depositing the originals or an approved microfiche copy of all records as a PCUSA congregation and any predecessor denomination (the cost of this will be included in the agreement with the congregation), new name for the congregation reflecting the change of denominational relationship, etc.); in fulfilling this task the team will document its consideration of value and include it in the recommended plan of separation that both the congregation and the Presbytery must approve. The first principle in the determination of value is that each congregation/situation has unique circumstances and must be evaluated. There is no standard formula for determining value.

- F. to determine voting procedures including but not limited to quorum and the vote required to approve the agreement and send it to presbytery for approval.
 - G. to take to Presbytery recommendation for action;
 - H. to assist the session in the implementation of the plans as determined above.
3. Following action by Presbytery upon recommendation from the Discernment Team, the moderator of the Presbytery will appoint an Administrative Commission (to be confirmed by the presbytery at its next meeting) to implement the plan.
 4. If a congregation takes unilateral action without following the above process, then the presbytery will take the appropriate action as detailed below.
 - A. An Administrative Commission will be appointed by the moderator and confirmed by the presbytery at its next meeting with powers to “visit particular churches. . .reported to be affected with disorder, and to inquire into and settle the difficulties therein.” G-9.0503. Such commission(s) will not have the power to dissolve a pastoral relationship or to dissolve a congregation or to declare it to be in schism without the vote of the presbytery.
 - B. The goal of gracious separation would remain the same and all efforts would be made to avoid litigation. “And how dare you take each other to court! When you think you have been wronged, does it make any sense to go before a court that knows nothing of God’s ways instead of a family of Christians? . . . These court cases are an ugly blot on your community. Wouldn’t it be far better to just take it, to let yourselves be wronged and forget it? All you’re doing is providing fuel for more wrong, more justice, bringing more hurt to the people of your own spiritual family.” (I Corinthians 6:1-8 The Message.)
 - C. pastoral care for all involved would remain a focal point
 5. Funds/property received by Presbytery in this process would be used for pastoral care of those who remain in the denomination and for continued PCUSA ministry to the area impacted.

APPENDICES

(Supplemental Material and Not a part of the Policy. These materials will be used by the Discernment Teams and any Administrative Commissions in their work.)

1. HOW THE PRESBYTERY WILL IMPLEMENT THE PLAN

- A. The Administration Council will create a subcommittee to administer this plan.
- B. The Nominating Committee will identify people who are ready to serve on Discernment/Resolution teams each year.
- C. The Presbytery will provide general training for those persons identified.
- D. The Presbytery will provide specific training for each team when established.

2. GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTION

Final Text: The 218th General Assembly (2008) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

- A. Directs the Stated Clerk to send this resolution to the presbyteries, synods, and sessions, indicating the will of the assembly that presbyteries and synods develop and make available to lower governing bodies and local congregations a process that exercises the responsibility and

power “to divide, dismiss, or dissolve churches in consultation with their members” (Book of Order, G-11.0103i) with consistency, pastoral responsibility, accountability, gracious witness, openness, and transparency.

B. Believing that trying to exercise this responsibility and power through litigation is deadly to the cause of Christ, impacting the local church, other parts of the Body of Christ and ecumenical relationships, and our witness to Christ in the world around us, [the General Assembly] urges [congregations considering leaving the denomination,] presbyteries [,] and synods to implement a process using the following principles:

- Consistency: The local authority delegated to presbyteries is guided and shaped by our shared faith, service, and witness to Jesus Christ.
- Pastoral Responsibility: The requirement in G-11.0103i to consult with the members of a church seeking dismissal highlights the presbytery’s pastoral responsibility, which must not be submerged beneath other responsibilities.
- Accountability: For a governing body, accountability rightly dictates fiduciary and connectional concerns, raising general issues of property (G-8.0000) and specific issues of schism within a congregation (G-8.0600). But, full accountability also requires preeminent concern with “caring for the flock.”
- Gracious Witness: It is our belief that Scripture and the Holy Spirit require a gracious witness from us rather than a harsh legalism.
- Openness and Transparency: Early, open communication and transparency about principles and process of dismissal necessarily serve truth, order, and goodness, and work against seeking civil litigation as a solution.

3. PRINCIPLES AND ASSUMPTIONS

- Building up the body of Christ: All that we do as a governing body and as congregations is to build the body of Christ so that it may proclaim Christ and engage in God’s mission to the world.
- Reconciliation: As Christ has reconciled us with him, we are to seek reconciliation among our brothers and sisters in Christ.
- Separation: Separation is the last choice for a witness to Christ in the world. When it is necessary, it is only to allow all to more effectively witness to Christ. The manner of separation should allow all parties to remain united in Christ while going on different paths.

4. DISSENT, DIVISION AND SCHISM

Dissent - Remaining together but acknowledging disagreement on some matters.

Division – separating for the sake of more effective witness while still seeing we are still connected in the wider church in ministry and mission. The apostle Paul separated from Barnabas over a disagreement but both continued in the mission of Christ and to respect each other in that mission. Acts 15:36-41 (New International Version, ©2011) 36 Sometime later Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.” 37 Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, 38 but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. 39 They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, 40 but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. 41 He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Schism – separation that imputes one is with Christ and the other is outside Christ, can no longer work together.

5. CONSIDERATIONS FOR CONSIDERING VALUE

The Discernment/Resolution Team in fulfilling its task: “E. to negotiate practical considerations for the action. (property, capital funds, any future bequests or beneficiary designations, consideration of payments to the denomination in the future; etc.);” will document its consideration of value and include it in the recommended plan of separation that both the congregation and the Presbytery must approve. The first principle in the determination of value is that each congregation/situation has unique circumstances and must be evaluated. There is no standard formula for determining value. In considering value the following will be examined:

- A. Value on the open market
 - 1. Condition and design of the building
 - 2. Value of property in its particular community
 - 3. Potential market
- B. Value to those who desire to leave the denomination
 - 1. To walk away from it
 - 2. To purchase other property
 - 4. To keep the property
- C. Value to Neighboring PCUSA congregations
 - 1. Would another PCUSA congregations be able to use the property for expansion of ministry and mission?
- D. Value to members of the congregation who do not desire to leave the PCUSA
 - 1. Are there enough people and financial resources to maintain and use the property for effective ministry?
 - 2. Is the community able to support the ministry of two “Presbyterian” congregations?
- E. Value to the Presbytery/PCUSA
 - 1. Could it be used for a new church development?
 - 2. Are the liabilities of owning it greater than its value?
 - 3. Value of lost support for per capita and mission?
- F. Value in historical perspective
 - 1. Was the congregation the result of a denominationally planned and supported new church development?
 - 2. Does the congregation predate denominational membership and support?

3. Is the congregation the result of merger or transfer from another denomination?
4. Is the congregation the result of a decision to affiliate with the Presbyterian church later in its life?

G. Value to God (God's mission)

1. Would litigation create a negative image to the world of who we are in Christ?
2. Would litigation cause more financial loss than any value from holding unto the property?
3. Would an empty building serve God?

6. CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING TRANSFER TO A REFORMED DENOMINATION

In considering whether the Presbytery will transfer a congregation to another Reformed Denomination or will dissolve the congregation and reach an agreement with the new independent congregation or a new congregation of another denomination the presbytery will examine the following areas. We will examine each proposed denomination as it presents itself.

A. Reformed

1. Relational

- a. Do we share full communion agreements?
- b. Is it a member of World Communion of Reformed churches?
- c. Is it a member of the International Conference of Reformed churches?
- d. Is it a member of the World Reformed Fellowship?
- e. Is it recognized by other Reformed bodies as Reformed?

2. Historical

- a. Does the denomination consist of churches that are historically emerge from any of these streams: Congregational, Presbyterian, Reformed and United churches with roots in the 16th-century Reformation led by John Calvin, John Knox and others?
- b. Does the denomination have roots in the 16th-century Reformation led by John Calvin, John Knox and others?

3. Theological

- a. Does the denomination incorporate any of the historic Reformed confessions, creeds and statements of faith in its standards?
- b. Does it highlight covenantal and doxological elements in statements of faith?
- c. Does it ask the questions reformed/Calvinistic folks usually spend time considering?

B. Denomination

1. Is it established as an organization?

- a. Incorporation
- b. Constitution
2. Does it have enough member congregations to be sustaining?
3. Can it provide support and guidance to its member congregations?

7. PRESERVATION OF CONGREGATIONAL RECORDS

- Session Minutes and Rolls
- Documents from the Presbyterian Historical Society