

## **Gracious Discernment Policy Presbytery of Wabash Valley**

### **Biblical and Theological Underpinnings**

In the second chapter of Acts we rejoice to read of the unity of the church both in fellowship and purpose.

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

(Acts 2: 44 – 47)

Unfortunately that idyllic state of the church did not last. We see that by the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts a couple of disciples would be lying to the apostles. In the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter a zealous Pharisee named Saul would be converted to the faith, but was considered untrustworthy by some. In Chapter 10 Peter would be called upon to preach the gospel to the Gentiles in Cornelius' house resulting in the first major division in the church over the inclusion of Gentiles. There would be arguments between apostles over missionary purpose and strategy resulting in people of good character going their separate ways. Petty jealousies arose among church people over which evangelist had been the best. In the New Testament letters we read of arguments over the importance of circumcision, meat sacrificed to idols, leadership of women and worship practices, among other issues. Clearly the early church was not immune to disagreement.

In the midst of disagreement, however, we also find a willingness in the early church to sit down together to talk, listen and seek God's leading. In Acts 15 the first council of the church was called in Jerusalem the apostles disagreed over what stipulations for inclusion might be made of Gentile converts. Paul and Barnabas were sent from Antioch to represent one side of the issue, while Jewish Christians of the Pharisaic persuasion in Jerusalem represented the other side. All were welcomed. The leaders of the church met, considered and debated the matter. Then they looked for a gracious solution and the will of God.

Reformed Christians early in the life of the church began articulating the desire to find unity on common ground and to be gracious toward one another in times of disagreement. Rupertus Meldenus, a German Lutheran theologian, in 1627 wrote words that have inspired the church for several centuries: "In essentials unity, in non-essentials diversity, and in all things charity." Meldenus was writing during the second generation of the Reformation in a time of great theological controversy that threatened to destroy the church. It is especially the charity we seek in our time and place in the church today.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has recognized from our earliest formation that people of good conscience may and do differ. "...we believe that there are truths and forms with respect to which people of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other." (F – 3.1005) In the recognition of differences in our beloved church today we seek to find a path toward mutual forbearance.

It is the purpose of this policy to seek to emulate the early church in its decision to welcome people of good character in disagreement, to sit together to listen, consider different viewpoints and debate important questions. Then with charity and mutual forbearance to seek to discern the will of God and to find gracious solutions moving forward.

## Introduction

Congregations of the PCUSA, while possessing all the gifts necessary to be the church, are enhanced by joining with other congregations in mutual support and mission. They are called to share with one another, both within and beyond the local congregation, the privilege of bearing witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the world (G – 3.0101). This interconnectedness is 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 the PCUSA and may desire to affiliate with another Reformed denomination or to otherwise sever ties with the PCUSA. This policy is designed to provide an orderly process in the decision making of the congregation and of Presbytery of Wabash Valley.

## Stepped Process

Presbytery of Wabash Valley recognizes that though all Presbyterian churches are similarly organized, no two congregations are alike. Each is unique, with different histories, living in different contexts and populated by members whose personalities contribute to the highly individualized character in each congregation. **Because we recognize this, each situation will be dealt with on a case-by case basis and no single resolution of one situation should be considered precedent for others.** When a dispute arises that may lead to dissolution of the relationship between a congregation and the PCUSA, presbytery has dual responsibilities to pursue.

1. First, it has a pastoral responsibility toward its church and pastors to try to achieve reconciliation, if possible. If this fails, presbytery's pastoral responsibility continues in the process of overseeing a gracious separation.
2. At the same time, the presbytery is responsible to its other member churches and the denomination to pursue provisions and processes congruent with the Constitution of the PCUSA (Book of Confessions/ Book of Order).

The following steps seek to provide for this dual responsibility.

## Step One – Initiation of a Listening Process

A Listening process may be initiated by either a congregation considering withdrawal from the PCUSA or by the presbytery upon hearing of a disturbance within a congregation that might lead to withdrawal. Congregations considering withdrawal should contact COM, the Stated Clerk or the Moderator of presbytery early in the consideration so brothers and sisters may come together to discern the leading of God's Spirit. COM may send a listening team to the church to meet with the Session as soon as possible. If the presbytery's COM decides to initiate a time of listening, the moderator will contact the pastor to arrange for a visit.

## Step Two – Listening, dialogue, discernment, reconciliation

Because every congregation is unique, the listening team may offer a variety of opportunities for the people of the church to express concern, to come together in discernment and to engage in dialogue with the presbytery team. The initial conversation will be with the Session, but the listening process

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may include the offering of listening sessions for members, congregational survey or other communication attempts.

The purpose of the Listening team is:

- a. to hear concerns,
- b. to respectfully consider important issues in the church,
- c. to determine if reconciliation without separation is possible and to recommend steps toward that end,
- d. to informally assess the number of members wishing to remain in the PCUSA and the number of members wishing to separate.

### **Step Three – If Reconciliation fails, movement to Congregational Ministry Study**

If after consultation and efforts toward reconciliation fail, the Session may vote to express a desire to move toward Gracious Discernment. This desire is expressed by a 2/3-majority vote of the Session with at least 2/3 of the Session Elders present. Proxy and/or email votes are not considered valid.

The Listening Team will then:

- a. Obtain email and postal mail contact information if they have not yet been obtained,
- b. Send a letter to the congregation to inform members of the Session's decision to pursue possible separation and to share the presbytery's Gracious Discernment policy and process,
- c. Contact COM to send the Chaplain for Gracious Discernment to initiate a non-partisan pastoral presence for members of the congregation. The Chaplain is present for all members and friends of the congregation to provide a listening ear and spiritual counsel, while remaining outside the negotiations. The Chaplain has agreed to remain neutral in the disagreement between the church and presbytery.

### **Step Four – Ministry Study**

Congregations experiencing significant change benefit greatly from a Ministry Study process. Although this study is not expected to be as extensive as the kind undertaken during an interim period; it is hoped this brief Ministry Study will give the congregation the opportunity to affirm its call and ministry within its unique context.

- a. The Session will appoint a Ministry Study Team to work with the Listening Team in arranging for the Ministry Study opportunity. The Ministry Study Team will be no larger than five and consist of 1- 2 current Ruling Elders, 1 current Deacon and 1-2 members of the congregation at large. If the congregation does not have Deacons, the number of at-large members will be 2-3.
- b. The Ministry Study Team will work with the Listening Team to arrange for Congregational conversation minimally around the following questions, and may choose to include additional questions.
  1. What aspects and actions of our church's ministry are so precious, so as to keep and build on for the next 25 years?
  2. Where have you sensed God's presence, promise, and joy in our church recently?
  3. How has denominational affiliation been a blessing to the church in the past?
  4. What hopes might you have for denomination affiliation blessing the church in the future?
  5. How might we, in this church, show greater appreciation for what God has done for us?

- c. The results of the study are to be summarized in a report to be shared with the congregation at a meeting which will be publically announced at worship on the two previous Sundays. Additionally notification will be sent by mail to all members no less than one week prior to the meeting.
- d. A non-binding vote of the congregation will be taken as to whether to pursue preparation for dismissal from the PCUSA the results of which will be reported to next Assembly of Presbytery of Wabash Valley together with the Ministry Study report.
- e. Listening Team will advocate for and provide pastoral care for those members desiring to remain within the PCUSA.

## **Step Five – Formation of an Administrative Commission**

If the congregation either votes to pursue dismissal, or if there is a division of the congregation, the Assembly will be encouraged to create an Administrative Commission. If the Ministry study process results in movement toward reconciliation, the Listening Team will remain in place to pursue a process of reconciliation. The Chaplain will remain through the process until resolution is achieved. The purpose of the Administrative Commission is to negotiate terms of dissolution with PCUSA or a division of the congregation if there is a core of members desiring to remain within PCUSA. The Administrative Commission of three will include at least one member of the original Listening Team and will work with three members of the Congregation's Ministry Study Team to negotiate practical considerations for the disposition of property, capital funds, any future bequests or beneficiary designations; consideration of contributions to the denomination; physical contents of the building (furnishings, decorations, art pieces), etc. The combined Administrative Commission and the three members of the Church's Ministry Study team will be considered the Negotiation team.

### **Principles and Processes**

- A. All actions of the Session, and the presbytery, and their individual members, shall conform to the PCUSA Constitution. Nothing in this document should be construed to limit or supersede the provision of the Constitution, including, but not limited to Church Property held in Trust (G – 4.0203), and Property of Congregation in Schism (g – 4.0207).
  1. Conversations and negotiations shall honor the faithful membership and witness of past generations. That is, as the Negotiation Team focuses on present disagreements and future possibilities, the voices of those who built and sustained the local church for years before shall not be ignored.
  2. Outstanding Loans: If property is negotiated to be transferred with a departing congregation to another Reformed denomination, and if a church seeking dismissal has outstanding loans to the Synod or other PCUSA body, before the actual transfer of title occurs, the loans must be paid back or transferred to another creditor as part of the loan being repaid. For any other loans, documents must be provided showing that Presbytery of Wabash Valley is no longer a guarantor of the loan(s).
  3. The congregation seeking dismissal shall provide and pay for a current appraisal of all properties.
  4. If any of the real property is to be deeded to another entity, the legal costs incurred shall be paid by the party to whom the property is transferred.
- B. The financial impact on mission and ministry of the presbytery shall be taken into account. Just as the process described here is designed to guide the presbytery in dealing respectfully with a congregation's desire to be dismissed, and to have that happen in a way that minimizes the impact on the congregation's ministry, it is also designed to assist the congregation in acting in

ways that minimize the impact of its departure on the mission and ministry of the presbytery. To that end, the Stewardship Ministry Team shall review proposed financial agreements prior to finalization. Any financial proposal which designates the funds will be considered out of order. Presbytery of Wabash Valley at a later time will decide the designation of settlement funds.

- C. As per capita and shared mission support are part of the covenant relationship with the PCUSA, all past due and current per capita due as of the first of the year in which dissolution is sought shall be paid in full.
- D. The PCUSA requires that the presbytery's stated clerk retain the original registers and session minutes of the any congregation seeking dismissal. There are options for accomplishing this but the presbytery shall bear none of the costs for microfilming, digitization or archiving.
- E. Pastoral support for members seeking to remain with the PCUSA shall be provided.
- F. Regarding matters of the value of church buildings and other property, a negotiated sum shall be contributed toward Presbytery of Wabash Valley.
- G. If a church is dismissed by presbytery, the rights and status of Teaching Elders, inquirers and candidates for the ministry are a primary concern.
  1. Teaching Elders, inquirers, and candidates may choose to remain as members or under care of Presbytery of Wabash Valley and not transfer to another Reformed body to which the congregation is being dismissed, or may request to transfer along with the congregation. If the transfer is not requested concurrently with the congregation's dismissal, the Teaching Elder(s) shall be declared a member at large within the presbytery.
  2. Inquirers and Candidates, who are members of the congregation will be assisted in identifying another congregation in the presbytery and may pursue a waiver of the time requirement for membership.
  3. In order to be dismissed, the called Teaching Elder must submit to the Stated Clerk of the presbytery a written statement renouncing the jurisdiction of this church, which is effective upon receipt (G – 2.0509).
  4. Transfers to another Reformed body shall normally be approved, unless the Teaching Elder member is a subject of a pending judicial or investigative actions. Members under discipline of the presbytery may not be transferred until the administrative process is completed and any required remedial actions completed. At that point the transfer may be completed, but a record of the committee or Permanent Judicial Commission decision must be transmitted to the other body prior to the transfer so proper disclosure of any issues can occur.

## **Step Six – Congregational Request and Presbytery Action**

If and when an agreed upon plan is prepared, the Negotiation Team will report this to the Session and to presbytery Council, both of whom will review the plan. If the negotiated plan is found in order, a moderator designated by the presbytery will convene a hearing where the congregation will be presented with the plan and asked to respond to it. As the dismissal or retaining of a congregation within Presbytery of Wabash Valley is by action of the presbytery alone, this hearing will be accepted as advisory.

- a. In order for the response to be meaningful, a least  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the members of the congregation will be present for this meeting based on the active membership roll reported to the General Assembly at the end of the previous year.
- b. The congregational vote to request dismissal shall be by secret ballot.
- c. If the congregation votes to request dismissal and supports the plan by a vote of at least  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the congregation's members present and voting, the request shall be considered by

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the presbytery at its next stated meeting, pending the presbytery's receipt of written confirmation from the receiving Reformed body that the congregation will be received.

d. The plan for dismissal shall be posted on the presbytery's website with the presbytery packet materials, and a notice of this action item shall be sent to each Session, and minister members of presbytery two weeks before the presbytery meeting at which this will be considered.

## **Step Seven – Vote of the Presbytery and Implementation**

If the plan proposed by the Negotiation Team and requested by the congregation is approved by presbytery, Presbytery will appoint an Administrative Commission to be charged by the Assembly to implement the plan.

## **Step Eight – When Agreement is not possible**

If a congregation takes unilateral action without following the above process, then the presbytery will take the appropriate action as detailed below.

- A. The goal of separating in God's grace will become the guiding interest, with particular concern for a just distribution of or compensation for resources that remain vital to the ongoing mission and ministry of Presbytery of Wabash Valley. Effort shall be made to avoid litigation.
- B. Pastoral care for all involved would remain a focal point.
- C. An Administrative Commission shall be appointed by the moderator and charged 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 – 3.0109). A variety of powers may be assigned such a commission, including but not limited to replacing the Session; but, the commissions cannot have the power to dissolve a pastoral relationship or to dissolve a congregation or declare it to be in schism without the vote of the presbytery.

Proposed: June 1, 2015

Task Force: Mike Munson, Mary Rasp, Jordan Truman, Quincy Worthington, and Moderator Sally Wicks

Revised and recommended by Council: July 21, 2015

Council agreed to carry out the task force recommendations for implementation:

- COM will recruit and train 1-2 listening teams to be ready to immediately visit a church considering Gracious Discernment should a need be indicated.
- COM will recruit 1-2 chaplains to be ready to step into a church under stress being particularly clear about the need to remain unbiased and to simply provide a listening ear and spiritual counsel.
- Council will consider an annual educational/training program for elders as assistance to churches and busy pastors, with at least some focus on some of the distinctiveness of being Presbyterian.