

The Presbytery of Elizabeth
Process for Use When a Church Wishes to Disaffiliate
With the Presbyterian Church (USA)
Second Edition, Revised by Cabinet: 11/8/11

The 218th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church took the following action in response to a Commissioner's Resolution:

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

1. 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 "which shall include organizing, receiving, merging, dismissing, and dissolving congregations in consultation with their members" (*Book of Order*, G-3.0301a) with consistency, pastoral responsibility, accountability, gracious witness, openness, and transparency
2. 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-3.0301a 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-4.02) and specific issues of schism within a congregation (G-4.0207). 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.

In response to this action, the Presbytery of Elizabeth has adopted the following process for congregations, the Committee on Ministry, and the presbytery at those times when congregations consider leaving the denomination. These items are not intended to describe a sequence of events, but to be the overall process for implementing in this presbytery the

principles described above in accordance with G-4.02 and G-3.0301a of the *Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*.

A: Biblical and Theological Principles From Scripture, the Book of Order, and the Book of Confessions

1. Elizabeth Presbytery affirms all Christians are called to unity in Christ through the church universal. While any denominational separation is tragic, when Christians of different denominational affiliation are respectful and cooperative, Christ is honored, the gospel is proclaimed, and God's Kingdom is manifested on earth.

Unity is God's gift to the Church in Jesus Christ. Just as God is one God and Jesus Christ is our one Savior, so the Church is one because it belongs to its one Lord, Jesus Christ. The Church seeks to include all people and is never content to enjoy the benefits of Christian community for itself alone. There is one Church, for there is one Spirit, one hope, "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Ephesians. 4:5-6).

Because in Christ the Church is one, it strives to be one. To be one with Christ is to be joined with all those whom Christ calls into relationship with him. To be thus joined with one another is to become priests for one another, praying for the world and for one another and sharing the various gifts God has given to each Christian for the benefit of the whole community. Division into different denominations obscures but does not destroy unity in Christ. The Presbyterian Church (USA), affirming its historical continuity with the whole Church of Jesus Christ, is committed to the reduction of that obscurity, and is willing to seek and to deepen communion with all other churches within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. (Book of Order, F-1.302a)

We trust in God the Holy Spirit, everywhere the giver and renewer of life. The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith, sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor, and binds us together with all believers, in the one body of Christ, the Church. (A Brief Statement of Faith, lines 52-56)

The Second Helvetic Confession addressed dissensions and strife in the Church, stating: "We know, to be sure, that the apostle said: "God is not a God of confusion but of peace." (1 Corinthians 14:33), and, "While there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh?" Yet we cannot deny that God was in the apostolic Church and that it was a true Church, even though there were wrangling and dissensions in it. The apostle Paul reprehended Peter, an apostle (Galatians 2:11 ff.), and Barnabas dissented from Paul. Great contention arose in the Church of Antioch between them that preached the one Christ, as Luke records in The Acts of the Apostles, Ch 15. And there have at all times been great contentions in the Church, and the most excellent teachers of the Church have differed among themselves about important matters without meanwhile the Church ceasing to be the Church to the glory of his name, to illustrate the truth, and in order that those who are in the right might be manifest (1 Corinthians 11:19). (The Second Helvetic Confession, Section 5:133, Book of Confessions)

2. All church property belongs to Christ, and should be used to advance God's Kingdom.

Working together, local congregations and their respective presbyteries will seek to ensure that all property decisions will further the great ends of church.

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you. (Matthew 28:18b-20)

"I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4.1-6)

Do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church. (Book of Order: W.4.4003 Vow of Ordination)

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me." (John 17:20-21)

3. Congregations and the presbytery should strive to honor Christ in the way they relate to each other when having conversations about dismissal.

- All parties shall maintain high standards of transparency, truthful speech, and mutual respect.
- All parties shall regularly and frequently pray with and for each other in this process.
- Pastors and ruling elders serving congregations requesting dismissal shall act in accordance with their ordination vows and the *Book of Order*. The presbytery will not seek removal of church officers solely because they are advocating for dismissal.
- Presbytery representatives will be brought into the early stages of the congregation's conversation, and provided opportunities to communicate with the congregation's members.
- Appeals to civil courts should be the avenue of absolute last resort.

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold... Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4:25-27, 29-32)

The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? (1 Corinthians 6:7)

"God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship."

(Book of Order: F-3.0101a, citing The Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.109, in The Book of Confessions.)

Footnote to G-2.0104b.

Very early in the history of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, even before the General Assembly was established, the plan of reunion of the Synod of New York and Philadelphia contained the following sentences: "That when any matter is determined by a major vote, every member shall either actively concur with or passively submit to such determination; or if his conscience permit him to do neither, he shall, after sufficient liberty modestly to reason and remonstrate, peaceably withdraw from our communion without attempting to make any schism. Provided always that this shall be understood to extend only to such determination as the body shall judge indispensable in doctrine or Presbyterian government." (Hist. Dig. (P) p. 1310) (Plan of Union of 1758, par. II.)

4. If a congregation is dismissed, Elizabeth Presbytery shall be the advocate for members who seek to remain in a Presbyterian Church (USA) congregation, negotiating with the departing congregation an equitable provision for those members' pastoral care. Convinced that God's Providence can bring good even out of schism, our ultimate goal is honor the Lord by seeking to bless each other, even in separation.

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. (Genesis 50:20)

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be. (1 Peter 5:2a)

B. Policy and Procedure.

1. ***In the event that members of a church raise questions to its session, in writing or during an appearance at a meeting of the session, about an action of the General Assembly and the session concludes that it lacks the information necessary in order to respond adequately to such questions or, following prayerful study and discussion that the session disagrees with the action of the General Assembly that generated the questions, the session will ask the Cabinet*** to send a delegation, including commissioners to the previous General Assembly, the Stated Clerk, and the Moderator of Presbytery, to a session meeting and, where it is deemed helpful by the session, an information sharing meeting of the congregation, to discuss actions and deal with rumors and speculation that may be causing disunity and concern in the life of the congregation. In this way, the presbytery will be given opportunity to exercise its pastoral responsibility for the welfare of congregations and to promote open communication whenever issues of the larger church arise.

2. Whenever there is conversation in the session or congregation about leaving the denomination, the session will ask the Cabinet to send a delegation, including at least one representative of the Committee on Ministry, as well as the Moderator of Presbytery, the Stated Clerk, and other selected members of the Cabinet to meet with the session to discuss the distress that is leading to this conversation and to review the provisions of the *Book of Order* and this document with regard to dismissal.

3. Prior to any formal request regarding dismissal of a congregation from the denomination, a Resolution Team will be appointed by the Moderator of Presbytery to consult with the session and congregation. This team shall include but not be limited to members of the Committee on Ministry, the Moderator of Presbytery, the Stated Clerk, and others, to engage in a period of no less than three months of consultation including meetings with the session and meetings with the congregation. The purpose of these meetings will be to review the provisions of the *Book of Order* and this document with regard to dismissal and to answer questions from members of the congregation regarding options for dismissal of the congregation, and for the membership of those members who wish to remain in the Presbyterian Church USA. In this way the session will provide the presbytery opportunity to exercise its responsibility as a partner with the session in pastoral care to members of the congregation in what may be a difficult time in its life. At these meetings every good faith effort will be made to effect reconciliation in accordance with the *Book of Order*. The resolution team will report its findings to the Committee on Ministry.

4. If the Resolution Team, in consultation with the session, determines that the congregation wishes to request presbytery for dismissal, the report to Committee on Ministry will include a request for permission to conduct a meeting of the congregation called and conducted by the presbytery so that the congregation can indicate by vote whether to request dismissal.

Prior to recommending the calling of a congregational meeting the Resolution Team shall review the church's register and the Minutes of the last 12 months of session meetings, to verify an accurate roll of active members.

Members of the Resolution Team will be invited to be present to offer pastoral care and prayer for the congregation and its members following the vote and to carry out the

presbytery's responsibility to ensure that all those persons affected by dismissal have an opportunity to be heard on the subject.

5. The congregational meeting shall be called by giving public notice on two successive Sundays, and written notification of all active members of the congregation, stating the reason for the meeting and the business to be conducted.

Notice of a congregational meeting called to vote on whether to seek dismissal from the denomination shall be given in writing and by public notice as follows: (a) written notice, provided by regular postal service or, for those indicating such a preference by electronic mail, stating the date, time, and place of the meeting and the nature of the business to be conducted, on two occasions: the first shall be deposited in the mail or distributed electronically not later than 21 days prior to the date of the meeting; the second shall be deposited in the mail or distributed electronically not later than 7 days prior to the date of the meeting; (b) public notice, by verbal announcement at all services or other gatherings of active members or by posting notice prominently at the entrances and other noticeable places on the church property on the two successive Sundays immediately preceding the date of the congregational meeting stating the date, time, and place of the meeting and the nature of the business to be conducted. The quorum of a meeting called to consider and vote on a proposal to request dismissal from the PC(USA) shall be 50% (fifty percent) of the members listed on the active membership roll. The vote on a proposal to request dismissal shall be by written secret ballot; the proposal shall be approved upon the affirmative vote of 4/5 (four-fifths) of those active members present and voting.

If the congregation votes in the affirmative, and its leaders are willing to work in good faith, the Resolution Team shall work to facilitate an agreement regarding the allocation of assets and property. This may include negotiating an agreement between the group of members who wish to be dismissed and a minority group of members who wish to remain in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

As a Presbytery, we recognize that Chapters 3 & 4 of the *Book of Order* provide that presbyteries may dismiss congregations from the Presbyterian Church (USA) in possession of their property by transfer to another Reformed denomination. When dismissing a church with its property, a presbytery is required to give proper consideration to the constitutional provision that all property is held in trust for the benefit of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

- The church shall be responsible for paying all legal and other costs incurred by both sides in this negotiation.
- The church shall, unless granted a waiver by the presbytery, remit all back payments of the per capita assessment.
- The church shall repay in full any outstanding loans to any entity of the PCUSA.
- The church and presbytery may negotiate other financial considerations to be paid to the presbytery.
- *The pastor(s) of the church shall renounce the jurisdiction of the PCUSA, unless this requirement is waived by the presbytery.*

The clerk of session and pastor(s) of the departing church will assist the presbytery to make contact with any members who wish to remain in a congregation of the Presbyterian Church (USA). All parties are encouraged to demonstrate charity and forbearance during this process. The presbytery will receive the congregation's request at its next meeting. The presbytery will vote on the request, considering the recommendations of the Resolution Team. The presbytery has responsibility to make its own independent decision in every case.

6. If there is division in a congregation indicated by a request from members loyal to the Presbyterian Church (USA) to remain in the denomination and in possession of the property, and the Resolution Team determines that a congregation intends to separate from the PCUSA and its leaders are not willing to work in good faith toward a mutually-agreeable resolution, it shall recommend the formation of an Administrative Commission empowered to take all appropriate and necessary action in the presbytery's stewardship of the congregation and its property.

7. According to an authoritative interpretation by the General Assembly (2008,14,15,546, Item 07-13) no congregation may be dismissed to independent or non-denominational status. The action by presbytery to dismiss the congregation shall state which denomination it is being dismissed to and an effective date.

(This policy is a revised version of a policy adopted by the Presbytery of Central Florida.)

Recommended by the Council on September 9, 2011 to the Presbytery of Elizabeth for a First Reading on September 27, 2011; and
Recommended by the Cabinet on November 8, 2011 to the Presbytery of Elizabeth for a **Second Reading on November 22, 2011**