

Ecclesiastical Process for Congregations Involved in Examining Their Relationship to The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Presbyteries and congregations are urged to engage in a gracious and pastoral manner toward one another throughout discussions surrounding issues of division, dismissal, or dissolution of congregations under the jurisdiction of the presbytery. Processes should be implemented 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 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-80000) 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. (from Item 04-28 Commissioners' Resolution, 218th G.A. 2008)

In the light of these principles, the following is a typical procedure surrounding the steps to be completed as a congregation engages in a discernment process regarding its relationship to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). By beginning this process, there is no assumption on the part of the presbytery that a congregation will be divided, dismissed to another Reformed denomination, or dissolved.

When a congregation expresses a desire to begin this process the following steps may need to be taken.

1. The presbytery shall appoint an Administrative Commission to inquire into the nature of the issues involved by listening to the concerns of the congregation. These duties include:
 - a. Regular attendance at meetings of the session by commission members,
 - b. Meeting with members of the congregation to gather information and a sense of the issues involved,

- c. When necessary, seek to clear up misunderstandings or clarify positions of the P.C. (U.S.A.),
 - d. Report to the presbytery regarding its findings and making recommendations for actions to be taken,
 - e. If the decision is to recommend a vote among the members of the congregation regarding their desire to remain in affiliation with the P.C. (U.S.A.), Commission members shall be present for the congregational meeting where such a vote is taken and will assist in the counting of ballots cast.
 - f. Following the vote, the Commission shall make a determination regarding if there is a sufficient enough congregation to maintain a P.C. (U.S.A) presence in the community. If so, they shall be given possession of the property and all assets of the church to continue carrying out the mission of the P.C. (U.S.A.). If not, the Commission may enter into discussions regarding the sale of the property and the assets, should the dissidents desire to purchase them.
2. Simultaneously, and especially if a complaint or accusation is made against the congregation's pastor or pastors for seeking to lead a congregation to leave the P.C.(U.S.A.), the Presbytery's Committee on Ministry may appoint an Investigative Committee to determine if the pastor or pastors have violated their ordination vows by disrupting the peace, unity, and purity of the church, or by failing to provide adequate pastoral care to the congregation. Should the Investigative Committee determine that the clergy have violated their ordination vows, charges may be filed with the Presbytery's Permanent Judicial Commission resulting in a trial being held, and if convicted, disciplinary action being taken.

The process may conclude at any time, should the session of the congregation vote to remain loyal to the P.C. (U.S.A.).

Action against the pastor or pastors also ceases if there is a renunciation of jurisdiction.