

DISCERNING GOD'S LEADING TOGETHER

Presbytery of Olympia

**Discernment and process for Presbytery and Congregations
Considering Withdrawal from the Presbyterian Church (USA)**

Approved November 20, 2008 and March 19, 2009

PREAMBLE: As we consider issues of denominational affiliation, we recognize and affirm that our indivisible unity is dependent upon our relationship through the Lordship of Jesus Christ, not the result of voluntary association (see also *Book of Order*, G-4.0200, the unity of the church).

SECTION ONE --- DISCERNMENT

Consideration by presbyteries and congregations of a church's withdrawal from the Presbyterian Church (USA) (PC(USA)) must begin with agreement upon principles of discernment. Spiritual discernment is a focused effort to sort out the will of God, distinguishing God's Spirit from other spirits that may be influencing us, such as the spirit of tradition, legalism, anger, loyalty, self-will or control. Discernment of God's Spirit requires intentional prayer, careful study, and deep listening to God and to each other.

Let us be led by the words of St. Paul: "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 the 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 4:1-5)

We, the members of the Presbytery of Olympia, will seek to honor Jesus Christ, Scripture, the Book of Confessions, and the Book of Order through respectful process and open dialogue. The premise upon which our process is built is that when we approach discernment together with intentionality, sincerity, openness to the leading of the Holy Spirit, and through the authority of the Word of God, the will of God will be revealed.

Discerning God's Leading Together guides congregations and the Presbytery, working in partnership, toward answering the questions, "Is God leading this particular congregation to disaffiliate from the PC(USA)?" And if so, "how can that be accomplished in a way that honors Christ's mission in the world and that seeks to strengthen both the congregation and the Presbytery"?

The ultimate goal of the Presbytery will be to discern whether God is calling a congregation to reconciliation and continued relationship with the PC(USA), or to withdrawal from the denomination. This discernment will be accomplished in a spirit of pastoral consideration, not by formal confrontation. The following process outlines the principles we will use as a presbytery, and that will be used by our

congregations, to respond to situations where our congregations are considering withdrawal from the PC(USA).

We will seek to respect both freedom of conscience and the essentials of Reformed Faith and polity as expressed in The Book of Confessions and the “Form of Government,” subject always to Scripture and the movement of the Spirit. We will work in good faith toward a mutually agreeable solution, but ultimately the decision reached through this process should reflect what would best serve not ourselves, but the cause of Christ.

SECTION TWO --- STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES

1. **Faithful departures.** A congregation discerning that it must leave the PC(USA) may be faithfully following the will of God for that particular church body.
2. **Commitment to avoid litigation.** In fulfillment of Resolution 04-28, adopted by the 218th General Assembly, we recognize that the exercise of the process to “divide, dismiss, or dissolve churches in consultation with their members” (*Book of Order*, G-11.0103), if accomplished by litigation, “is deadly to the cause of Christ . . . and our witness to Christ in the world around us.” Therefore we will carefully follow the principles of consistency, pastoral responsibility, accountability, gracious witness, openness and transparency.
3. **Open Communication.** We affirm the right of Pastors and Elders to discuss options for responding to the actions of the Presbytery, Synod, and General Assembly.
4. **“Early entry” conversations.** Pastors and/or Sessions which begin intentional and sustained discussions about separation from PC(USA) will invite Presbytery participation through the General Presbyter and the Care Team representative, or other Committee on Ministry designee. The General Presbyter would also be expected to make pastoral contact with any congregation that is understood to be struggling with its future in the PC(USA).
5. **Congregational Gatherings.** Whenever any congregational gatherings involving withdrawal considerations are held, Presbytery representatives will be invited to participate and speak.
6. **Presbytery teams.** To ensure adequate communication between the particular church and the Presbytery, teams will be formed as needed. These are as follows:
 - A. For the Discernment Process (Section Three) a Discernment Team will be formed, comprised of balanced representation from the affected congregation and COM appointees [representation detailed in Section Three]. The Discernment Team will assist and support the congregation as it

- discerns the future of its affiliation with the PC(USA) and will ensure that the Council is apprised of ongoing conversations and discernment. People trained in conflict resolution will be available throughout the process.
- B. If the process proceeds to final negotiations over terms of separation, the Presbytery shall elect an Administrative Commission as its representative, with clearly defined responsibilities established by vote of the Presbytery. COM is encouraged to nominate members of the Discernment Team to be considered for the Administrative Commission.
7. **Presbytery – congregation contacts.** Presbytery has a responsibility to ensure that all active members of a congregation are involved in any discernment process.
 8. **Commitment to negotiate.** If a congregation and its leadership faithfully follow this policy and reach the conclusion that separation from the PC(USA) is the will of God, then the Session and Presbytery will negotiate in good faith to reach a fair, just and reasonable dismissal agreement.
 9. **Trust clause.** All property in the PC(USA) is held in trust for the use and benefit of the Presbyterian Church (USA) (*Book of Order*, G-8.0201). Decisions about property will be made around future ministry and mission concerns for both the congregation seeking dismissal and the PC(USA).
 10. **Faithfulness to past members' intentions.**
 11. **Media contacts.** Presbytery and the Session will work together to create a media plan, designating who will provide information to the media from the Presbytery and the Session, and committing to work in concert on such contacts in order to maintain a witness to Christ in the world.
 12. **Case-by-case application of principles.** This policy establishes principles for discernment in situations where withdrawal from the PC(USA) is being considered. Each situation will be uniquely addressed on its own merits, using the principles set forth in this policy.
 13. **Book of Order.** This policy is expressly subject to all existing provisions of the *Book of Order*. No statement herein may be interpreted to contradict any specific provision of the *Book of Order*. Further, in the event that the principles stated in this policy are not being followed, Presbytery may invoke other *Book of Order* process as needed.

SECTION THREE --- DISCERNMENT PROCESS

1. Pastor(s) or Session(s) of congregation(s) which are considering the possibility of separation from the PC(USA) are encouraged to pray and

- openly discuss with one another the issues confronting their individual congregation. When they begin intentional and sustained conversations concerning separation, they shall meet with the General Presbyter and a representative appointed by the Committee on Ministry (COM) to initiate communication between the congregation and the Presbytery.**
- 2. To affirm the connectional nature of our relationships, those who are considering these matters are encouraged to hold shared discussions with other Pastors and Sessions for communal discernment.**
 - 3. If further conversation about disaffiliation is desired/appropriate, the Session will invite COM to appoint two representatives to seek resolution and to advise the Session on the implications of considering disaffiliation. The COM appointees will apprise the COM of the ongoing discernment of the Session.**
 - 4. The Session, in conjunction with the COM appointees, will arrange one or more congregational gathering(s) to invite the members into a time of discernment, education and prayer.**
 - 5. If the Session determines that the congregation desires to continue a process of discernment, the Session and the Presbytery will work together to form a Discernment Team (DT). The team will be comprised of the two COM appointees and two representatives chosen by the Session. The DT will be responsible for recommending a discernment process to the Session. Progress is to be reported regularly to COM.**
 - 6. The DT will meet with the Session and its Moderator as ongoing discernment progresses. If desired by either Session or the COM representatives, they will also meet with the congregation in appropriate gatherings. At any time during the discernment phase, a person trained in conflict resolution may be requested by the DT. Possible topics for conversation include the following:**
 - Reflecting on Scripture together and praying**
 - Rooting the identified issues in Scripture and our Reformed Tradition, as reflected in the Constitution of the PC(USA).**
 - The nature of discernment**
 - Exploration of church polity including implications of the Trust Clause for both the congregation and also the Presbytery and denomination**
 - Exploration of constitutional ways of influencing the polity of the PC(USA)**
 - Options and ramifications of options before the congregation**
 - Strategies for listening to any clearly identified factions within the congregation; in most instances, the decision to withdraw is a personal one, not a corporate one.**

7. **When the DT has determined that all pertinent issues have been addressed, including identifying the reformed body to which the congregation would be dismissed, and that disaffiliation may be God’s will for that particular congregation, the DT will invite congregation members to gatherings that “afford to all persons to be affected by the decision fair notice and an opportunity to be heard on the matters at issue” (G-9.0505b1).**
8. **The DT is required to be present at the gatherings and to serve as a resource for the congregation’s questions. They are also tasked with making sure that all members have an opportunity to voice their concerns. The DT will determine how many members wish to be dismissed to the identified reformed body, how many wish to remain part of an ongoing PC(USA) congregation, and how many are undecided at this time. The DT will report to the COM whether an Administrative Commission will need to be appointed to carry the work forward.**

SECTION FOUR: FINDING A WAY FORWARD

1. Terms of disaffiliation will be established through an Administrative Commission. The Commission is to be comprised of seven members with balanced representation of Elders and Ministers of the Word and Sacrament (G-9.0504b). The nominees to the Administrative Commission are to be nominated by the Committee on Ministry in consultation with the church’s Session. The Administrative Commission’s task is to act as the Presbytery’s representative in the negotiation process, and is at no time to be used in a disciplinary manner. This process of negotiation between the Administrative Commission and the Session’s representatives will be guided by the principles set forth in the previous sections of this policy.
2. As negotiations proceed, all parties will be mindful of reaching an honorable and just settlement which recognizes the responsibilities toward all involved---the members who wish to leave the PC(USA), those who wish to remain, and the Presbytery of Olympia and its mission.
3. At the conclusion of the negotiations, and prior to its recommendation to the Presbytery, the Administrative Commission will hold congregational hearings to present its recommendation to the active membership and to serve as a resource for any questions they may have. The Administrative Commission is also tasked with making sure that all those present, including dissenting voices, have an opportunity to voice their concerns. At these hearings, an advisory vote may be taken to give an opportunity for the membership to voice its desire for or against disaffiliation and to determine whether there is congregational agreement with the negotiated plan.

4. The final step of the disaffiliation process will be the Administrative Commission presenting its recommendation to the Presbytery for action.

SERVICE OF BLESSING

Should a particular congregation and the Presbytery of Olympia discern together that the best course of action should be that the congregation withdraw from the PC(USA), and once the details of the separation agreement are decided, ratified by the Presbytery and settled, a service of worship shall be held to celebrate our common life in Christ and pray for the well-being and effectiveness of both the congregation and the presbytery. The service shall be coordinated by the Council of the Presbytery. All congregations of the Presbytery of Olympia shall be invited.

[Note: Section 4 was adopted March 19, 2009]