

**DISCERNING GOD'S LEADING TOGETHER:  
THE JUBILEE PROCESS  
Presbytery of Olympia**

A Process of Working with Congregations Considering Withdrawal from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

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 requires intentional prayer, careful study, and deep listening to God and to each other.

Hear 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, 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 openness to the leading of the Holy Spirit and through the authority of the Word of God, the appropriate process to follow the will of God will be revealed.

The Jubilee Process guides congregations and the Presbytery, working in partnership, toward answering the questions, "Is God leading this particular congregation to disaffiliate from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)?" And if so, "how can that be accomplished in a way that honors Christ and strengthens both the congregation and the Presbytery?"

The ultimate goal of the Presbytery will be to discern whether reconciliation and continued relationship with a particular congregation is God's will, or whether withdrawal from the PC(USA) is the path that God desires. If disaffiliation is discerned to be God's will, then the Presbytery will seek to further discern the appropriate process for separation. The following process outlines the steps we will use as a presbytery and as individual congregations, pastors and Sessions to discern together the will of God for the churches of the Olympia Presbytery.

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.

Finally, we will seek to follow the Commissioner's Resolution (04-28)—On Urging a Gracious, Pastoral Response to Churches Requesting Dismissal from the PC(USA) as passed by the 218th General Assembly of the PC(USA) on June 27, 2008. The Resolution condemns secular litigation as "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." (#2 of Resolution 04-28). Therefore the process of the Olympia Presbytery and its congregations will seek to avoid legal action, except as a last resource. This includes actions against property and assets of the individual churches, as well as against the leadership

of the churches.

“Synods and councils are to handle or conclude nothing but that which is ecclesiastical; and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or by way of advice for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate.” Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.176

The principles of GA Resolution 04-28 are as follows:

*Consistency:*

“But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.” James 3:17-18

The Olympia Presbytery process will be consistent among the churches. We seek to bring the same principles of justice to one another, regardless of the differences in theology, property, leadership, and location.

*Pastoral Responsibility:*

“He chose David his servant and took him from the sheep pens; from tending the sheep he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel his inheritance. And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them.” Psalm 78:70-72

“He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.” Isaiah 40:11

“This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?” Ezekiel 34:2a

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” John 10:11

From the Questions for Ordination of Ministers, Elders and Deacons: “Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God’s Word and Spirit?”

The Jubilee process will “highlight the presbytery’s pastoral responsibility” (GA Resolution 04-28). The Olympia Presbytery will seek to make decisions with integrity of heart, gentleness, careful tending of the flock with a sacrificial spirit of friendship, and will be subject to the ordering of God’s Word and Spirit.

*Accountability:*

“Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.” 1 Cor. 4:2

“For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be

measured to you.” Matthew 7:2

“Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” Romans 12:17-18

“Wherefore the ecclesiastical power of the ministers of the Church is that function whereby they indeed govern the Church of God, but yet so do all things in the Church as the Lord has prescribed in his Word. When those things are done, the faithful esteem them as done by the Lord himself.” 2nd Helvetic Confession, 5:160-163

“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.” (GA Resolution 04-28)

The Jubilee Process will include steps of accountability of both the Presbytery to itself and its congregations, and also of those congregations to the Presbytery. We recognize that, above all, we are accountable to the Word of God and to the Lord. The Process will seek to discern faithful steps to honor the trust given to the Presbytery for the care of the properties of the member churches, acknowledging that the trust given is a sacred responsibility to further God’s kingdom, not to enable the PC(USA) to indiscriminately separate congregations from their church properties and assets.

*Gracious Witness:*

“And the word of the LORD came again to Zechariah: “This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another.’” Zechariah 7:8-9

“But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless.” Titus 3:9

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." John 13:34-35

“At all times and in all places the rule is to be observed that everything is to be done for edification, decently and honorably, without oppression and strife. For the apostle testifies that authority in the Church was given to him by the Lord for building up and not for destroying (II Cor. 10:8)” 2nd Helvetic Confession 5:165

“The church thus orders its life as an institution with a constitution, government, officers, finances, and administrative rules. These are instruments of mission, not ends in themselves.” The Confession of 1967, 9.40

“It is our belief that Scripture and the Holy Spirit require a gracious witness from us rather than a harsh legalism.” GA Resolution 04-28

In all steps in the Jubilee Process, as well as in all decisions made concerning specific issues, the Olympia Presbytery will seek to be a gracious witness to the churches and their flocks, as well as to the communities surrounding the churches. As discernment progresses, mercy, compassion, edification, love and encouragement will be priorities over rules and regulations. “Foolish controversies” and

“quarrels about the law” will be avoided, as they constitute harsh legalism, not gracious witness. Above all, we will remember that the Presbyterian Church (USA) and its institutions are instruments of mission, “not ends in themselves.”

*Openness and Transparency:*

“Listen, for I have worthy things to say; I open my lips to speak what is right. My mouth speaks what is true, for my lips detest wickedness.” Proverbs 8:6-7

“Better is open rebuke than hidden love.” Proverbs 27:5

“For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open.” Mark 4:22

“Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much.” Luke 16:10

Too often processes involve closed meetings and secretive discussions and decisions. An atmosphere of distrust prevails, leading to a lack of open and honest communication. The Presbytery of Olympia commits to openness and transparency within its own committees and council as well as among the churches. It is further resolved that it shall be the policy of this Presbytery that no Minister of the Word and Sacrament, Elder or Deacon shall be subjected to any form of discipline under the Book of Order for any speech that is not contrary to the Word of God, whether that speech is given to individual congregations or Sessions or to the whole body of the Presbytery. Informing groups of people regarding practices and policies of the institutions of the PC(USA) shall not be considered inappropriate nor subject to discipline. Likewise, informing congregations, Sessions and Presbytery members of options available to congregations who are considering disaffiliation with the PC(USA) and entertaining discussion on such options shall not be abridged nor punished in any way. “Speech” shall include written and oral communications, as well as participation or membership in any group or association of Christians of the Reformed faith. Protecting the rights of speech for Ministers of the Word and Sacrament, Elders, and Deacons will lead to a building of trust, and to the ability to join all parties together for the goal of discerning God’s will for the congregations of the Olympia Presbytery. Lastly, the mission statement of the Presbytery of Olympia states: “The Presbytery of Olympia exists to serve Christ through supporting and strengthening congregations and clergy and offering its life in worship, service and witness.” The Jubilee Process will enable the Presbytery to honor this statement as it comes alongside congregations who are discerning God’s direction in their relationships with the PC(USA). May Christ be honored as we go forward in this journey.

## **SECTION ONE – INITIAL DISCERNMENT PROCESS**

Colossians 3:12-14: Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Presbyterians affirm that discernment for pastors and congregations involves a tri-fold revelation of God’s will. The Spirit speaks through the pastoral leadership of each church, through the voices of the

congregation and its Session, and also through the body of the Presbytery. We affirm that our highest calling is to the mission of the Kingdom of God, not to the maintenance of any particular institution. We sadly recognize that because of matters of conscience, congregations occasionally may find it necessary to separate from the institution with which they have been affiliated in order to accomplish their mission. These situations require prayer, total commitment to following the will of God, and bearing with one another with “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.”

Therefore, in order to distinguish God’s will in the matter of disaffiliation, and to honor Him and each other, the following initial process is adopted:

1. Pastors and Sessions will pray and openly discuss with one another the issues confronting their individual churches. Where appropriate, they are welcome to hold shared discussions with other Pastors and Sessions for communal discernment.
2. If further discernment is necessary, then after prayer and a majority vote in a called or stated meeting, the Session will invite its PCCT representative to give guidance in a possible resolution and/or on the implications of proceeding further with the process. The PCCT representative will inform the COM of the ongoing discernment of the Session.
3. If resolution is not accomplished, the Session will invite the COM to form a Presbytery Discernment Team (PDT). This Team will consist of the PCCT representative, another representative chosen by the COM from its membership, a representative from the Presbytery Council chosen by the Council, and a representative chosen by the Session. Additionally the Team will be chaired by a person specifically trained in conflict resolution by a Presbytery-approved entity (i.e. a Certified Interim Pastor).
4. The PDT will initially meet with the Session and the Moderator separately. While the Moderator is absent from the Session meeting, he/she will appoint a qualified person to moderate the meeting. The purpose of the initial meetings will be to discern whether the Session and its leadership are unified in their discernment, as well as to give opportunity for the raising of concerns by either.
5. The PDT will report the results of these initial meetings to the Presbytery through the COM and the Council.
6. The PDT will continue to meet with the Session and its Moderator as ongoing discernment progresses. Possible topics for conversation include the following:
  - the nature of discernment
  - rooting the identified issues in Scripture and our Reformed Tradition
  - 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 before the congregation
  - strategies for listening to any clearly identified factions within the congregation
  - reflecting on Scripture together and praying
7. The PDT will not determine the outcome of the discussions, but will work to assure that all issues have been adequately addressed before they are brought before the congregation. In addition the PDT will assure that the Presbytery, through its COM and Council are fully informed as the discussions continue.
8. In the case of lack of resolution of the issues during the time of initial discernment, the Presbytery and the church will enter into negotiations for disaffiliation, using the process outlined below.

## SECTION TWO: THE JUBILEE PROCESS

If it becomes necessary to negotiate the church's separation from the PC(USA), the following steps will be taken. Throughout the process, both the Presbytery and the church agree that:

- The Trust Clause will not be used to shackle churches to the institution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) if the congregation has followed the discernment process and truly feels God's leading to depart.
- It will not be used as a means of taking civil action against a congregation in keeping with 1 Corinthians 6:1-11 over issues of conscience (G-1.0300).
- The Clause is a visible example of the inter-connection between the Presbytery and its congregations, and should be an opportunity to witness unity to the world, not a tool to cause division and disagreement.
- The Trust Clause will not be used by the Presbytery to initiate civil litigation against a congregation faithfully following the Initial Discernment and/or Jubilee Processes.
- The Presbytery recognizes that "the church" is not buildings nor assets, but is the body of believers—the people of each congregation.

1. When a congregation's Session and Pastors, with the participation of the PDT, have determined that all issues have been addressed, and that disaffiliation appears to be God's will for that particular church, a special Congregational meeting will be called. The purpose of this initial meeting will be to hear from the membership their own discernment and desire either to disaffiliate or to remain part of the PC(USA). Though a quorum for Congregational meetings is set by the Book of Order at 10%, in order to fairly hear the voice of the church, it is expected that 50% of the active membership will participate in the meeting.
2. At the meeting it is allowable to conduct a non-binding written ballot vote to discern how many members, should the way be clear, would desire dismissal from the PC(USA).
3. If a minimum of 75% of the attending members vote for dismissal, the PDT will begin to negotiate terms of dismissal with the congregation through its Session, Pastors and Finance Committee.
4. During negotiation if an impasse is reached between the Presbytery and the congregation, both agree to submit to binding arbitration. The arbiter will be a practicing Christian and a member of the American Arbitration Association or the Peacemaker Ministries. The arbiter will be agreed upon by both parties, and both agree to submit to his/her decisions without exception. The costs for the arbiter will be divided equally between the Presbytery and the congregation.
5. As negotiations proceed, both parties will be mindful of reaching an honorable and equitable settlement which recognizes the responsibilities towards all involved—the members who wish to leave the PC(USA), those who wish to remain, and the Presbytery of Olympia and its mission. In cases where a financial settlement is part of the dismissal agreement, that settlement will be based on fairly and proportionately meeting those responsibilities.
6. As a primary responsibility, both the congregation and the Presbytery will seek to meet the spiritual needs of those members desiring to stay within the PC(USA).
7. At the conclusion of the negotiations, a Congregational meeting will be called to vote on the possible dismissal and agreement with the negotiated plan. At least fifty percent of the current active membership must attend the meeting. An affirmative vote of at least seventy-five percent will be required to pass the dismissal motion.
8. The final step of the Jubilee Process will be the ratification of the disaffiliation agreement by the Presbytery of Olympia and the voting to grant dismissal. In the case of a negative vote of Presbytery, the process of Binding Arbitration will be followed.

## **SERVICE OF COMMISSIONING**

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 will be held to celebrate our common life in Christ and pray for the well-being and effectiveness of both the congregation and the Presbytery. Those departing the PC(USA) will be commissioned by the Presbytery to further their work for the Kingdom as they go forward in ministry. The service will be jointly planned by a planning team comprised of three people appointed by the Council of the Presbytery and three people appointed by the Session of the church. All congregations of the Presbytery of Olympia shall be invited.