

2 **Process for Separation**
3 **Proposed Response to Potential Consideration**
4 **of Requests for Dismissal**
5 **from Washington Presbytery**
6 **July 10, 2007**

7 **Introduction**

8
9 While affirming our essential unity as the body of Christ, we recognize that there are times when
10 separation becomes an imperative of conscience either for an individual or a congregation.
11 Given the present discussions within our denomination and within our own Presbytery, we
12 believe that it is prudent to develop principles for discussion of separation and any potential
13 action before they become necessary. In this way, we seek to affirm a decision making process
14 that remains faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ and our common bond in Him.

15
16 We acknowledge the difficulty of these issues and recognize our responsibility, whether in
17 agreement or disagreement, to act and to treat one another in a Christian manner that honors our
18 God. Difficult decisions of conscience may need to be made, but they must not be allowed to be
19 driven by selfishness, by a struggle for power, or by vindictiveness. In disagreement, we must
20 seek the good of God's Kingdom and follow the example of Jesus in setting the interests of
21 others above our own.

22
23 Additionally, individuals, congregations and the Presbytery should be given opportunity to
24 discuss and prayerfully consider options without fear of sanction or punitive action. Care should
25 be taken in such discussions to ensure that all voices are heard and that historic decisions are
26 made cautiously and deliberately and result from seeking prayerful guidance.

27
28 While tangible issues of property and assets enter into any real consideration of possible requests
29 for dismissal, we affirm that we are stewards of God's resources intended to be used for His
30 honor and glory. Consequently, while we note the constitutional principle of church property
31 "held in trust," we desire neither to make property the focal point for the congregation nor to use
32 the threat of its seizure as a coercive instrument of the presbytery.

33
34 The intent of the following document is to lay out a process that is fair, clear, and easily
35 understood. While final decisions concerning requests for dismissal must be made by the
36 Presbytery, we believe these guidelines will prove helpful to all parties concerned, and hope that
37 they will encourage openness and trust as we seek the will of Christ together.

38
39 **Process**

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41 When the session of a particular congregation votes to present its membership with a request for
42 dismissal, the clerk of session should notify the Stated Clerk of Washington Presbytery
43 immediately.

44
45 At that time, the Presbytery will invite the session to enter into a covenant with the Presbytery
46 for the purpose of prayerful discernment. Under the covenant, the Session will commit to
47 scheduling a congregational meeting for consideration of dismissal between four months and a
48 year after their initial notification. The Presbytery, through the Presbytery Council, will appoint
49 a team of presbyters (known as the "Pastoral Team") to represent the Presbytery and to work

50 alongside the session in consideration of any action. Together, the session and the Presbytery
51 team will engage in mutual and shared prayer seeking God’s guidance and direction.

52
53 Should the session be willing to enter the covenant relationship, its responsibilities will include:

- 54
55 1.) The development of a “plan of mission,” describing the church’s ministry outside of
56 Washington Presbytery and the Presbyterian Church (USA), should the congregation
57 choose to withdraw from the Presbytery.
58 2.) Commitment to an open process of congregational discernment, in which minority voices
59 are heard and respected.
60 3.) The development of a plan to minister to any minority constituency after the
61 congregational vote is taken.

62
63 The session will be encouraged to invite members of the Presbytery Pastoral Team to address
64 their regular meetings and join them in prayer.

65
66 The Presbytery Pastoral Team will be appointed by the Presbytery Council with Presbytery staff
67 (GP and/or Stated Clerk) serving “ex-officio”(voice, but not vote). Every effort will be made to
68 assemble a team that is perceived as fair. While representing the Presbytery for prayer,
69 information and advice, the team is not an administrative commission. It has no authority to take
70 any action regarding the property held in trust, pastoral leadership, session membership nor the
71 moderator of the session. The responsibilities of the Pastoral Team will include:

- 72
73 1.) Prayer for and with the session and congregation.
74 2.) The provision of an open channel of communication with Presbytery bodies, including
75 (but not limited to) Presbytery Council, the Committee on Ministry, Ecclesiastical
76 Affairs, and the Trustees.
77 3.) Advocacy for the Presbytery and denomination.

78
79 The session will invite members of the Pastoral Team to attend the congregational meeting at
80 which dismissal is considered. The moderator of the congregational meeting will offer team
81 members and Presbytery staff the opportunity to speak. The congregational meeting to consider
82 dismissal will be conducted according to the Book of Order. All active members of the
83 congregation will be encouraged to attend and participate in the meeting. Inactive members
84 should also be invited to participate in the meeting – but informed that they will not be allowed
85 to vote.

86 87 **Guidelines**

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89 When the congregation considers the question of requesting dismissal, it should be understood
90 and communicated clearly that responsibility for the division, dismissal or dissolution of
91 churches lies with the Presbytery, “in consultation with their members.” It is also the
92 responsibility of the Presbytery to develop strategy for the mission and witness of the church in
93 this geographic region. As a result, any final decision on a request for dismissal or dissolution
94 must be taken by Washington Presbytery as a whole.

95
96 Without abdicating its constitutional responsibility, Washington Presbytery designates a Pastoral
97 Team in order to work cooperatively with a local church considering a request for dismissal.

98 This Team will report to the Presbytery and may recommend action on any congregational vote
99 to request dismissal with church property.

100
101 In order for the Presbytery Pastoral Team to consider supporting such a request, the following
102 guidelines should be followed:

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- 104 • The covenant between the session and the Presbytery, committing each to prayerful
105 reflection and fair and open discussion, must be kept.
- 106 • Any congregational meeting to vote on a request for dismissal must be scheduled to
107 provide sufficient time for deliberate reflection, education and participation by all active
108 members of the congregation.
- 109 • With the scheduling of the congregational meeting, a letter from the Pastoral Team will
110 be sent to the active membership of the congregation introducing the team and
111 explaining the process.
- 112 • While the quorum for congregational meetings is set by the Book of Order, and by the
113 bylaws of particular congregations, the Presbytery expects that a goal of fifty percent of
114 the active membership participate in the meeting. In order for the active members to feel
115 free to act based upon conscience, a written ballot for voting is expected.
- 116 • The tally of the vote will be attested by the congregation and the Pastoral Team.
- 117 • Requests for dismissal to another church body must specify a denomination or governing
118 body in the Reformed tradition.
- 119 • There must be a plan of mission in place for the continuation of the work of Jesus Christ
120 in the geographical area of the congregation.
- 121 • There must be a plan to support any substantial group voting in the minority that desires
122 to continue local ministry in the Presbyterian Church (USA).
- 123 • At least seventy-five percent of the active members voting must be in favor of dismissal.
124 If the vote passes with a majority less than seventy-five percent, the Presbytery Pastoral
125 Team will not recommend support for such action on the floor of Presbytery. If a
126 majority of seventy-five percent or greater votes to seek dismissal, the Presbytery
127 Pastoral Team will recommend consideration of dismissal of the congregation with the
128 property “held in trust.” This recommendation will be made based upon resolution of
129 any outstanding debts and dedicated endowments and will include all property, real and
130 personal, without financial encumbrances.

131
132 If these guidelines are fulfilled, the Presbytery Pastoral Team will support and recommend the
133 proposed request to Washington Presbytery. The Pastoral Team will seek to make a unanimous
134 recommendation regarding the fulfillment of “spirit” and “letter” of this process. The Pastoral
135 Team’s vote will be reported with their recommendations to the Presbytery.

136
137 Actual decision-making on a request for dismissal by a congregation, the continuing ministry of
138 the Presbyterian Church in that region, and any property “held in trust” will be made by
139 Washington Presbytery at a properly announced meeting. At that meeting, representatives of the
140 congregation will be given opportunity to explain their request and members of the Team will
141 make their recommendations. Any decision will be made by Washington Presbytery based upon
142 its understanding and commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ expressed through the
143 Presbyterian Church.