

# **Presbytery of Charlotte Commitment to Pursuing Reconciliation**

## **With Member Churches Seeking Dismissal from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)**

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### **PROLOGUE**

The Presbytery of Charlotte is committed to pursuing reconciliation with pastors, sessions, and congregations who are seeking or considering dismissal from the denomination. Whether that reconciliation takes the form of dismissal, mutually accepted re-commitment to the presbytery-congregational relationship, or something in-between, it is the will of this presbytery to create a gracious context and process in which the will of God is sought for the life, ministry, and calling of the particular congregation. The presbytery commits itself and invites all its congregations to pursue this broad understanding of reconciliation with a graciousness befitting those who claim Jesus as Lord.

In all matters relating to this subject, the following three questions will be deemed paramount:

- a. Is God leading this particular congregation to seek dismissal from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), or toward restoration of fellowship with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)? And,
- b. If God is leading this congregation to seek dismissal from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), how can that be accomplished in a way that honors Jesus Christ and strengthens both the congregation and the presbytery?
- c. If God is leading this congregation toward restoration of fellowship with the Presbyterian Church (USA), how can that be accomplished in a way that honors Jesus Christ and strengthens both the congregation and the presbytery?

The presbytery asks that any session seeking or considering dismissal from the denomination will covenant with the presbytery to enter into a defined process of mutual discernment through the formation of a discernment team from the presbytery and the local congregation (see “Procedure” below). To seek such discernment adequately will require significant time and energy, but we believe that a matter of this magnitude deserves such attention and that the presbytery and local congregation will benefit from the process whatever the specific outcome may be. As described below, this process should take no less than one year and no more than two years. At the conclusion of the process, the discernment team will make a recommendation on reconciliation to both the church and the presbytery for their vote.

### **PROCEDURE**

A session wishing to initiate this procedure should put the matter to a vote. If the majority of the session votes to initiate the discernment procedure, the clerk of session should contact the presbytery office and inform the stated clerk of this desire. Both parties may then begin the work of recruiting member representatives for the discernment team.

The discernment team shall consist of four representatives from the church and four representatives from the presbytery. The session of the congregation shall choose the representatives from the church; the presbytery council will choose representatives from the presbytery. The discernment team shall covenant to meet together four times, with each meeting lasting approximately two hours.

The discernment team shall also include a moderator, mutually chosen and agreed-upon before the first meeting of the team, whose sole purpose is to facilitate the conversation so that each team member has an equal chance to participate.

The discernment team will meet four times within a six month period. The content of the meetings is outlined below. Team members should plan to devote two hours to each meeting. Members of the congregation who are not serving on the discernment team are strongly encouraged to attend team meetings in order to listen to the content of the discussion. In each two-hour meeting of the discernment team, 90 minutes will be devoted to discussion of the day. During the remaining 30 minutes, the team will listen to feedback from any observing congregants. This feedback will help determine the content of the third and fourth meetings of the discernment team.

#### First Meeting

During the first meeting, discernment team members will exchange extended introductions, sharing a portion of their faith stories and their understanding of the spiritual and theological issues at stake in the conflict between the church and the Presbytery. The first meeting will primarily be a listening session.

#### Second Meeting

The second meeting will consist of a guided dialogue, facilitated by the moderator of the discernment team, on foundational theological issues. Members will be invited to share their personal understanding of various theological issues. The purpose of this discussion is to determine how much common theological ground exists between the congregation and the presbytery/denomination. Are the theological differences confined to certain issues (such as purity or sexuality) or do the conflicts run deeper to Christological, ecclesiological, or other foundational theological issues?

#### Third and Fourth Meetings

The content of the third and fourth meetings will be determined mutually by the members of the discernment team. In determining the content of these meetings, the team will consider feedback received from congregants who have observed the discernment process.

After completing the four sessions, the discernment team will make a report and recommendation to the congregation and to the presbytery regarding reconciliation. If the discernment team perceives that the congregation and the presbytery are still called by God to work together in covenant relationship and recommends restoration of fellowship between the congregation and the presbytery, it is hoped that the church will be led by this recommendation and that both parties will work together to craft a process to heal the broken relationship (see Appendix B). If, after completing this process, the discernment team perceives that God is no longer calling the congregation and presbytery to work together in covenant relationship and recommends dismissal to another Reformed body, it is hoped that the presbytery will ratify the discernment team's decision and support the congregation as it enters into the process of seeking dismissal as outlined below in Appendix A.

These policies and procedures shall take effect immediately upon approval by the presbytery.

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*NOTE: If a congregation or its leadership preemptively files suit in a civil court against the Presbytery, the Presbytery of Charlotte will answer the suit. Likewise, if a congregation or its leadership abandons these processes before completion, it is within the purview of the presbytery to establish an administrative commission to work toward resolution of these matters with the congregation. All policy considerations listed in this document also apply to an administrative commission.*

## APPENDIX A

### Process of Seeking Dismissal to another Reformed Body

Upon completion of the discernment process described in the “Commitment to Reconciliation,” a session and congregation desiring to enter into the process of dismissal shall follow this procedure:

1. The session shall call for a meeting of the congregation. Advance notice for the meeting shall be by written letter to each member on the active roll of the congregation, as well as through Sunday worship announcements. The letter shall be mailed at least thirty days in advance of the meeting date, and public worship announcements shall be made at all worship services between the date of the call and the actual congregational meeting. Representatives of the presbytery (members of the reconciliation team, council, and staff presbyters) shall also be invited to the meeting, with the right to address the body gathered.
2. A quorum for this congregational meeting shall be one-half of the active membership, the attendees being recorded by name.
3. The session shall make written proposals to the congregation that it deems to be in fulfillment of the congregation’s intentions. All members present, as well as the representatives of presbytery, shall have the right to speak. When the discussion is concluded, the vote shall be taken, by written ballot of the active members of the congregation present. At least two-thirds of those present and voting must vote in favor of requesting dismissal to another Reformed body in order for the proposal to be passed.
4. If a motion requesting dismissal is passed with at least the requisite majority, then the presbytery council shall begin a process of negotiation with the congregation to determine the terms of dismissal. This process should be concluded within a reasonable time, but at most within twelve months from the time that the first step of the process was instigated by either congregation or presbytery. The terms of dismissal agreed upon in this negotiation process must then be returned to the congregation for a subsequent congregational meeting, called and announced in the same manner as required for the prior meeting, and with at least one-half of the active congregation present, accepted by a two thirds majority of those present and voting, in order to be the effective decision of the congregation.

**\*\*NOTE:** In the event that the vote for the terms of dismissal, as worked out by the presbytery and the congregation, does not attain the required level of affirmative votes, then two choices remain open to the congregation at this time.

- a. It may, through its authorized representatives continue to negotiate with the presbytery to seek different terms for dismissal, and then offer these to the congregation for another vote (under the same terms as the previous meeting and voting requirements); or
- b. It may choose not to pursue dismissal further at this time, in which case it must, by appropriate congregational meeting and vote (under the same rules outlined above for congregational meetings), rescind its earlier action requesting dismissal. Should this all take place, presbytery shall continue to work with the congregation with the goal of reducing dissatisfaction and enhancing the relationship between the presbytery and the congregation.

5. If more than ninety percent of those present and voting vote for dismissal, the presbytery shall agree to the dismissal, permitting the congregation to depart with all of its property intact. If the majority percentage is between sixty-six and two-thirds percent and ninety percent, then the congregation and the council shall work to determine a fair money and/or property amount to be given to presbytery, in order for the congregation to depart with its property. Several suggested methods of resolution are here offered for consideration by council and the congregation in resolving the matter, but are not stipulated as mandatory:
  - a. The congregation may be dismissed and take with it property equal in value to the percentage of members present and voting (i.e. if eighty per cent voted to seek dismissal, the congregation may retain and take with it eighty percent of the value of its assets, and must prepare a schedule in conjunction with the council for the time frame for remitting the remaining twenty percent to the Presbytery. Alternatively,
  - b. The congregation could volunteer to make payments of money to the Presbytery over a five year period to replace the lost mission and per capita money that the Presbytery would otherwise have expected to receive during those five years, either on a straight line basis or on a declining basis (i.e. 100% the first year, 80% the second year, etc.). Alternatively,
  - c. A congregation that attains a greater than ninety percent vote, and is thus to be permitted to depart with all of its property, shall be encouraged to volunteer to make some monetary contributions to the Presbytery for several years as a way of expressing its gratitude for the historic and on-going work of its life as a congregation of the PC (U.S.A.) through the Presbytery of Charlotte, and to aid in providing ministry for those members of the departing congregation who decide that they want to remain within the PC (U.S.A.), or to aid in initiating new PC (U.S.A.) ministry in the community.
6. A congregation that is approved for dismissal may take its name with it.
7. In the event that any congregation is approved for dismissal under the terms of this policy, the presbytery and the congregation shall take all steps possible in order to provide for the pastoral care and congregational life of those members who do not wish to depart the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Their protection and nurture shall be a matter of paramount concern to both the departing congregation and to the presbytery.
8. In the event that any congregation's request for dismissal is approved under the terms of this policy, the presbytery shall, in conjunction with the congregation, hold a final worship service of commissioning, to celebrate our common life in Jesus Christ and to pray for the effectiveness and well-being of both the congregation and the Presbytery. Those departing the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) 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 members of presbytery's council and the session, and all congregations of the Presbytery of Charlotte shall be invited.
9. A congregation being dismissed will be required to pay off any loans outstanding to any entity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Matters of loans of the congregation held by non-Presbyterian entities are the responsibility of the congregation, and the presbytery shall be legally relieved of any responsibility related to such loans.
10. A congregation being dismissed will be required to close out its financial and membership books as of the official date of dismissal, and to file all reports required by the presbytery for statistical record-keeping.

11. A congregation being dismissed will be required to work with the Presbyterian Board of Pensions to effect a clean break as of the time of dismissal.
12. A congregation being dismissed will work closely and diligently with the presbytery to assist in the transfer of membership of members who do not desire to remain with the disaffiliating congregation.
13. There are some practical considerations to be addressed, should a congregation be approved for dismissal. These are listed for information, but are not binding for the purposes of this policy.
  - a. The status of the minister(s) currently called by the congregation: whether they shall remain with the congregation and transfer their ministerial status to the new denomination, or whether they choose to remain within the PCUSA, and thus need to look forward to seeking a new call.
  - b. The status of any insurance policies held by the congregation with instrumentalities of the PC (U.S.A.) may need to be changed.
  - c. The tax status of a congregation as a 501c(3) non-profit tax-exempt organization may need to be re-established under the new denomination to which the congregation is being dismissed.
  - d. The corporate status of the congregation may need to be revised.

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## **APPENDIX B**

### **Guidelines for Restoration of Fellowship and Recommitment to Presbytery-Congregational Relationship**

In hope that God leads those involved to seek a restored fellowship and a recommitment to the presbytery-congregational relationship, the following are presented as minimal guidelines for marking and sealing that recommitment:

1. Conducting a public service of worship and recommitment to shared fellowship and ministry, with participation from presbytery and congregation.
2. Sharing of story and testimony from members of the discernment team and congregation at the congregational and presbytery level (and beyond, if appropriate).
3. Blessing and commissioning of any minority that leaves the local congregation (to the extent possible), in the hope of maintaining bonds of peace.