

Policy For Considering Gracious Dismissal To Another Reformed Denomination Presbytery of Missouri Union

PROLOGUE

In 2008, the 218th General Assembly (2008) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approved a resolution expressing “the will of the assembly that presbyteries and synods develop and make available to lower governing bodies and local congregations a process that exercises the responsibility and power ‘to divide, dismiss, or dissolve churches in consultation with their members...with consistency, pastoral responsibility, accountability, gracious witness, openness, and transparency.” In response to this directive, the Presbytery of Missouri Union commits itself to ministries of reconciliation, grace and mutual forbearance in dialogue regarding potential dismissals from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The Ministry of Reconciliation

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us....(2 Corinthians 5:17-20).

As ambassadors for Christ, the people of the Presbytery of Missouri Union are committed to a ministry of reconciliation with regard to teaching elders, sessions and congregations who are seeking or considering dismissal from the denomination. Whether that reconciliation takes the form of dismissal, 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.

The Ministry of Grace

Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. (2 Corinthians 4:15)

As beneficiaries of God’s grace, the people of the Presbytery of Missouri Union are committed to a ministry of grace with respect to the diversities and differences among us. We recognize that

Presbyterians of good conscience, abiding faith in Christ, and genuine commitment to the Word of God and our confessions can come to different interpretive conclusions about the meaning of scripture and God's will for the church. We affirm that those whose consciences are strained by recent decisions of our denomination, as well as those whose consciences are clear and are in support of these changes, are all brothers and sisters in need of grace. Because the new life in Christ "takes shape in a community in which people know that God loves and accepts them in spite of what they are," we therefore seek to accept and love ourselves and others, "knowing that no one has any ground on which to stand, except God's grace" (*The Confession of 1967*, 9.22, inclusive language version).

The Ministry of Mutual Forbearance

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. (Ephesians 4:1-3)

As a body of Reformed believers who affirm the importance of "bearing with one another in love," the Presbytery of Missouri Union is committed to a "ministry of mutual forbearance" in relation to those with whom we disagree. The new "Foundations of Presbyterian Polity," which mirror the Historic Principles of Church Order in previous versions of the *Book of Order*, claim "that there are truths and forms with respect to which men of good character and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other" (F-3.0105). In the dialogues and discussions relating to potential divisions, dismissals or dissolutions of congregations within its bounds, the Presbytery of Missouri Union commits itself to follow this historic principle to the best of its ability, with God's help.

I. DISCUSSION OF WHAT IT MEANS FOR PROPERTY TO BE "HELD IN TRUST" FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)

"All property held by or for a congregation, a presbytery, a synod, the General Assembly, or the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), whether legal title is lodged in a corporation, a trustee or trustees, or an unincorporated association, and whether the property is used in programs of a congregation or of a higher council or retained for the production of income, is held in trust nevertheless for the use and benefit of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.);" (G-4.0203).

A. The Presbytery of Missouri Union understands that the Trust Clause (G-4.0203) is a reflection of the church's organic unity as it fulfills "The Great Ends of the Church." Even as we profess that congregations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) do possess all the gifts necessary to be the church, we also profess in G-3.0101 of the *Book of Order* that there is "a mutual interconnection of the church through its councils" and that no congregation can claim to be "sufficient" in itself as the church. Under this provision, particular congregations "are called to share with others both within and beyond the congregation the task of bearing witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the world." It is the charge and duty of all councils of the church "to nurture, guide, and govern those who witness as part of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), to the end that such witness strengthens the whole church and gives glory to God." The Trust Clause is a specific manifestation of what the "mutual interconnection of the church through its councils" means for us with regard to our faithful stewardship of the property given to us by God for ministry.

B. The Trust Clause also reflects our understanding of the church as a communion of saints across time, with responsibilities both to those who came before and to those who will follow. When a congregation

seeks to leave the Presbytery, it is breaking what is often a significant historic relationship; it is also departing from a fellowship in which its officers have participated, by whose polity they have pledged to be governed, and with which many members may feel bonds of affection.

This policy therefore cautions any congregation seeking to separate from the Presbytery to consider its actions carefully.

- C. Under the Trust Clause, a particular congregation's church property, both real and personal (including, without limitation, land, buildings and fixtures), is held in trust for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Except as otherwise specifically provided in the *Book of Order*, a congregation cannot sell, lease, or encumber its property without the permission of Presbytery, nor can it take property with it to another denomination unless Presbytery voluntarily releases its claim upon the property.
- D. For the reasons set forth above, the Trust Clause should be viewed as a defense of the ministry and mission of the church universal, not as an offensive weapon to be used against any council or other embodiment of the church. In considering enforcement of the provisions of the Trust Clause, all parties with an interest in the Trust Clause are called to act with grace rather than as adversaries. Scripture calls us to seek in all humility to resolve our disagreements graciously, with due consideration for the interests of others and a recognition that the way we handle disagreements can serve as a positive witness to the gospel in the world.

II. OUTLINE FOR A PROCESS OF DISCERNMENT WITH PRESBYTERY

- A. When Presbytery becomes aware, through Session action, that a session and/or a congregation feels estranged from the PC(U.S.A.) to the extent of considering dismissal from the Presbytery and the PC(U.S.A.), an Administrative Commission will offer to meet with the Session and jointly, or subsequently, with the congregation as the church tries to discern God's will for denominational affiliation.
- B. The AC and the Session will seek a time of prayer and conversation focused upon understanding the conflict and identifying potential steps toward reconciliation.
- C. The meetings with the Administrative Commission (AC) shall be conducted as follows:
 - 1. The AC shall covenant to meet together with the Session of the congregation. As each situation is unique, this may consist of more than one meeting
 - 2. At each meeting with the AC and the particular church, all participants covenant to strive earnestly, in a spirit of Christian love, to (i) pray and study together; (ii) search for avenues of mutual reconciliation, offer grace, and exercise mutual forbearance as led by the Holy Spirit; (iii) be open, honest, and transparent; (iv) speak the truth in love; and (v) genuinely seek to discern not human will, but God's will, for the denominational affiliation of the congregation.
 - 3. Members of the congregation are strongly encouraged to attend such meetings in order to listen to the content of the discussion.
- D. A primary goal of the AC conversations with sessions/congregations, when there is a group that desires to remain within the PC (U.S.A.) and a group that desires to be dismissed to another Reformed body, shall be the discussion of financial, property and other issues, including continued use of the church name. The purpose of this discussion shall be to enable members that wish to remain and those that wish to move to a new denominational fellowship to be reconciled in the aftermath of

separation, if dismissal does occur. If after a period of dialogue, the AC and the Session are convinced of a deep gulf between the congregation and the PC(U.S.A.), and that they are not able to establish a process for continued relationship with the PC(U.S.A.), the AC and the Session will begin the process of determining whether the Session and congregation desire to request dismissal as provided in Section III below.

III. PROCESS TO DETERMINE IF A SESSION AND CONGREGATION DESIRE TO REQUEST DISMISSAL

If the Session, following the conclusion of the meetings described in Section II, in consultation with the Administrative Commission (AC), decides by majority vote, that maintaining the current relationship with the PC(U.S.A.) seems unlikely, then those discussions shall cease and the Session shall call for a congregational meeting to determine the desires of the congregation on the question of pursuing the process to request dismissal to another Reformed body.

- A. Written notice for such meeting shall be given thirty (30) days prior to the meeting and shall be noted in the weekly bulletin and from the pulpit four consecutive Sundays for a meeting to be held within ten (10) days of the last pronouncement from the pulpit.
- B. A quorum for this meeting shall be fifty percent (50%) of the active members of the congregation.
- C. The question to be determined at this congregational meeting shall be whether or not the congregation should request of the Presbytery permission to be dismissed to another Reformed body.
- D. Any active member shall have the right to speak at this meeting, and all speakers are urged to utilize Christian harmony in their presentation.
- E. The AC shall be invited to attend the congregational meeting and shall be permitted to speak if its members desire to do so.
- F. At conclusion of all discussion and a prayer, votes shall be taken on paper ballots that provide a vote for "Request dismissal" and "Do not request dismissal".
- G. The votes shall be counted by two designees of the Session and may be observed by the AC.
- H. If sixty-five percent (65%) of those present and voting, mark their ballots to "Request dismissal," it shall be deemed that the congregation has elected to seek dismissal to another Reformed body, and shall then enter into the next phase of the process.

IV. PROCEDURE TO DETERMINE TERMS OF DISMISSAL

A. Negotiating the terms of dismissal

The dismissal of a church from the Presbytery may be a traumatic event in the life of the congregation and the Presbytery. The actions of the Presbytery shall be truly focused on the preservation and even the advancement of ministry through the process of negotiation and after the congregation is dismissed. The Administrative Commission (AC) will engage with the Session to negotiate the terms of dismissal. The AC and Session shall elect a moderator for joint meetings by a majority of the vote of

both bodies. It is expected that once the process has reached this stage, the negotiations should be able to progress relatively quickly and be able to be completed within sixty (60) days.

B. Terms for release to another body

Consistent with PC (U.S.A.) Polity and General Assembly actions, congregations seeking dismissal from the Presbytery may only be dismissed with its property to another Reformed body. A congregation cannot be dismissed to “independency.” Also, congregations can only be dismissed by the formal action of the Presbytery. Notwithstanding the foregoing, in the event any provisions of this paragraph are inconsistent with the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shall control.

C. Terms of dismissal of a particular congregation

1. The AC and the Session shall engage in discussions to determine what would be gracious, fair and reasonable terms under the circumstances for the particular congregation to be dismissed. To be dismissed with a significant portion, or all, of its liquid, real and personal property to another Reformed body, some aspects to be considered by the AC and Session could be:

- Size of minority seeking to stay with PC(U.S.A.)
- Relative contributions of time, talents, and financial treasure of those members who prefer to be dismissed from the denomination and those members who prefer to remain within the denomination
- Amount and value of property of the congregation
- Nature of the property, i.e. liquid or fixed, real and personal
- Ability of a majority of the congregation to pay the contemplated amount
- Congregation’s existing debt service
- The effective date of the dismissal
- Whether the congregation has received financial assistance from the Presbytery, Synod, General Assembly or from other congregations within the Presbytery within the past ten years.

2. As one possible means of bringing resolution to the terms of dismissal, the AC and Session shall consider asking the congregation to make payments to the Presbytery of Missouri Union mission budget for a limited time. Such payments, if agreed to, could represent a shared commitment to outreach and mission that would continue despite the dismissal and be a witness to the world of the unity of purpose that still remains within the body of Christ notwithstanding the parting of ways. If the possibility of shared commitment exists, the AC and Session shall work in good faith to find mutually agreeable possibilities for this type of shared ministry.

3. In all cases of dismissal, notwithstanding any other terms and conditions negotiated by the AC and the Session, a congregation that has elected to be dismissed must commit to the following terms and conditions:

- a. Payment to any teaching elder installed by that congregation at the time of dismissal who decides to remain with PC(U.S.A.) of a minimum of six (6) months’ salary, housing and benefits, less any compensation received by the teaching elder from other sources of employment during said six (6) months’ term as provided in the Presbytery’s current dismissal policy for teaching elders.
- b. If a congregation seeking dismissal has outstanding loans to the Synod or other Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) body or affiliated foundation, then before dismissal occurs such loans must be paid back.

4. The Presbytery explicitly acknowledges that any session/congregation requesting and receiving permission to leave the Presbytery and the PC(U.S.A.) may, at any time, apply for readmission to the Presbytery under the then current provisions of the *Book of Order*.

V. CONGREGATIONAL APPROVAL OF NEGOTIATED TERMS

As soon as the Administrative Commission (AC) and the Session arrive at terms acceptable to the two committees, the Session shall call for a final congregational meeting to validate the terms negotiated.

- A. Notice shall be the same as provided for in the first congregational meeting.
- B. The quorum shall be computed the same as provided for in the first congregational meeting.
- C. All members of the congregation shall have an opportunity to speak, as well as the AC members.
- D. At the conclusion of all discussion and a prayer, votes shall be taken on paper ballots that provide a vote for “Accept terms” or “Reject terms” and no additional writing or marking on the ballot shall be considered. The votes shall be counted as provided in the first congregational meeting.
- E. If sixty-five percent (65%) of those present and voting elect to “Accept terms,” the agreement between the AC and the Session is validated and shall be deemed to represent the wishes of the congregation.

VI. PROCESS FOR PRESBYTERY TO VOTE TO DISMISS A CONGREGATION

Once the Session and congregation have formally voted to request dismissal from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and have accepted the terms of the negotiated agreement for dismissal, Presbytery will call a vote at the next Stated Meeting of Presbytery on accepting the terms of the agreement and dismissing the congregation to another Reformed body, by a simple majority vote. The written settlement agreement will be made available to all members of Presbytery for their review well in advance of the meeting at which the Presbytery vote will be taken.

VII. POST-DISMISSAL CONSIDERATIONS

- A. Status of Teaching Elder Members of Presbytery
Teaching elders who are installed within the congregation at the time of dismissal may request transfer to the Reformed body to which the congregation is requesting dismissal, or they may remain as members of Presbytery.
- B. Status of Members of the Congregation Being Dismissed
It is important for both the AC and the Session to communicate carefully with congregation members so that divisiveness is minimized between those in the congregation who wish to withdraw and those members who want to remain in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). After formal voting by the congregation and Presbytery has been completed, all members will be contacted by the Presbytery of Missouri Union regarding their membership status.
- C. Status of Members of the Congregation Who Wish to Remain Members of a PC(U.S.A.) Congregation
If specific members within a dismissed congregation choose to remain in the PC(U.S.A.), the Presbytery will provide pastoral support, guidance and resources for processing the transitions,

seeking or developing a new PC(U.S.A.) congregation, and/or addressing other matters of concern and care.

D. Status of Members under Care of Presbytery

Special attention should be given to members of the congregation who are preparing for ministry and are under the care of Presbytery. Each member under care, together with his/her liaison from the Committee on Preparation for Ministry (CPM), should be advised immediately of the congregation's desire to seek dismissal. The member under care will be given the option of being dismissed with the congregation or transferring their membership to another congregation with Presbytery and/or the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). If transfer to another congregation within Presbytery/the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is requested, the AC and the CPM liaison will assist the member in seeking a waiver of the usual six-month requirement for church membership in order to maintain care status.

E. Service of Worship to Acknowledge Dismissal

The Presbytery shall offer to organize and lead a worship service, including observance of the Lord's Supper, to acknowledge termination of the existing denominational relationship, to acknowledge the bonds of Christian love and duty that still bind us together, and to affirm the Presbytery's continuing care for the congregation.

F. Final Reports

The congregation shall close out its financial and membership books as of the official date of dismissal and file all reports required by the Presbytery for statistical record keeping. The Congregation shall provide its minutes and records for copying by the Presbyterian Historical Society and shall cover the expenses involved.