

# **John Calvin Presbytery Policy for Congregations seeking Dismissal**

## I. Background

The mission statement of John Calvin Presbytery reminds us of our connectional nature:

Joyful, holy community of Christian believers diverse yet united,  
Committed to serving Christ in the church and in the world,  
Prepared by God through the Holy Spirit for mission and ministry.  
(Adopted by John Calvin Presbytery on January 7, 2007.)

An earlier statement expands that connectional understanding:

We are most alive when we gather as a Presbytery in the name of Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to do God's mission in southeast Kansas and southwest Missouri.

We are active members of all ages from congregations and ministers of Word and Sacrament, challenged by the culture in which we are set.

We are gathered as Presbytery to pray, to sing, to hear God's Word, to seek God's transformation of congregations, and to discern together how we can be open to the activity of the Holy Spirit among us.

We are then scattered – and as we are empowered by the Spirit, inspired by the Scriptures, informed by the Book of Confessions, and instructed by the Book of Order, we seek to challenge, support, strengthen and care for our congregations in their mission, who through Word and Sacrament, Christian nurture, fellowship, and care, equip their people to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world, to exercise compassion, to do justice, and to be stewards of God's creation in their daily life.

(Adopted by the 94th Stated Meeting of John Calvin Presbytery, July 10, 1995)

The apostle Paul understood that while the church is one in Christ Jesus, people of faith may disagree, so he wrote: "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." (Eph. 4:1-3) This is the spirit in which we hope to work with churches in our presbytery as they discern God's call to them.

We are Presbyterian because we believe that we are stronger in mission and ministry together than we are separately. Difficult issues, in which faithful people find themselves of different minds, can bring about a crisis of connectionalism. We understand that the denomination is facing such issues and we hope to provide an environment in which churches and members can continue to be in conversation together and remain faithful to their own convictions. We intend to address concerns in a pastoral and caring manner, hoping to be able to remain connected to one another in Christ Jesus, to whom all glory belongs.

The 218th General Assembly (June 2008) expressed its will that presbyteries and synods make available to lower governing bodies and local congregations a process

that exercises the responsibility and power “of dismissing or dissolving churches in consultation with their members” (Book of Order, G-3.0301a), with consistency, pastoral responsibility, accountability, gracious witness, openness, and transparency. With this policy, John Calvin Presbytery wants to be faithful in that call, with the fervent prayer that this policy need never be used.

## II. Policy

A. If a congregation wishes to begin a conversation about disaffiliating from the PC(USA), the Stated Clerk of the Presbytery shall set up a meeting between the congregation's session and the Moderator of Presbytery, the COM liaison for the church, the Pastoral Presbyter and the Stated Clerk. The purpose of this meeting is to discuss the discernment process that has already occurred and to aid in further discernment going forward.

B. The Mediation Team of the Committee on Ministry, in consultation with the Moderator of Presbytery and the Stated Clerk, will form a Discernment Team, consisting of five people, who will facilitate conversations with the session and congregation during a discernment period which will ordinarily last four months. There will normally be as many as three meetings of the session and as many as three gatherings of the congregation over that time at which open and candid conversation will take place. The period of conversation and the final number of meetings with the session and with the congregation will be determined by the COM. During these meetings all questions and concerns will be treated with pastoral care and sensitivity. The COM liaison for the congregation will not be part of the Discernment Team so as to provide support and neutrality for the congregation during the process.

C. At the end of the discernment period, the COM liaison and the Stated Clerk will be invited to meet with the Session and the Discernment Team to discuss the next steps. If the session has decided to remain in the PC(USA), the relationship between the church and the presbytery will continue to be nurtured so as to strengthen the ties. If the session has decided that it would like to continue on the road to disaffiliating from the PC(USA), the following process will be clarified and the Discernment Team, the COM liaison, and the Stated Clerk will be available to facilitate each step. This group will also work with the session to resolve and clarify all financial and ecclesiastical details. The Pastoral Presbyter will be available to provide pastoral care and conversation to anyone in the church who needs it.

### D. Hearing the Desire of the Members of the Church

A letter shall be sent to all active members of the church inviting them to gather and discuss their preferences with the Discernment Team, the COM liaison, and the Stated Clerk. The notice of the gathering shall be read at each worship service from the time the letter is sent until the appointed day. This meeting is an opportunity for the presbytery to hear clearly the desire of the congregation. All members will have the opportunity to ask questions and share concerns. The Discernment Team may decide if taking a survey of the congregation would make the desire of the congregation clearer. Because it is solely the authority of the presbytery to dismiss a congregation to another denomination, any survey taken is advisory only.

E. The Discernment Team will share its findings with the Committee on Ministry, which may in turn, recommend to the presbytery that the congregation be dismissed to

another reformed denomination or be dissolved. Any recommendation from COM for dismissal to another reformed body or for dissolution must include a finding that the mission of Jesus Christ is best served by this action, and that the PC(USA)'s use and benefit of the congregation's property have been considered in making this recommendation.

F. At the next stated presbytery meeting the Discernment Team will share the process and outcome of the visits and listening sessions. The COM will bring the motion they recommend for the congregation. A simple majority vote of the presbytery is required for approval.

G. If the pastor of the church that is separating wishes to remain in the PC(USA), the congregation shall be required to pay the pastor's salary and benefits for one year. If a candidate under care of the congregation wishes to remain in the PC(USA) and the congregation is providing financial support, that support shall continue for a year.

H. The symbol of the PC(USA) must be removed from all signage and documentation as soon as practical. The minutes and roll book of the PC(USA) congregation belong to the PC(USA). The congregation shall send the books to the Historical Foundation and can receive digital copies of those records for themselves.

I. All loans and grants made through PC(USA) entities must be paid in full before final disaffiliation. Any loans with other financial institutions will no longer be backed by the presbytery and the name of the presbytery must be legally removed from such documents. The Discernment Team and the Session will work together to be sure that all endowments, bequests, and gifts meet the desires of the donors. This may mean that some gifts remain with the presbytery for use in the PC(USA).

J. The General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (Tom v. Presbytery of San Francisco, Oct. 28, 2012) has ruled that a presbytery may grant permission for a congregation to take ownership of their property provided that due consideration is given to the mission and ministry of the PC(USA) in the area. The presbytery must consider its fiduciary responsibility to the denomination as it determines these arrangements. Details in this regard will be worked out by the General Council of the presbytery with input from the Discernment Team and the Committee on Ministry and a recommendation made to the presbytery for its vote.

K. Pastoral care will be provided for the members wishing to remain in the PC(USA) and their membership will be moved to churches of their request. A final worship service will be held in the congregation to celebrate the work of the PC(USA) congregation and to commission those moving to another denomination for their work in God's kingdom.

L. If a church refuses to participate in the process outlined by the presbytery or cuts off the process prematurely or attempts to call a congregational meeting to vote on disaffiliation, the presbytery will appoint an Administrative Commission to determine the next steps.

### III. Considerations for Disaffiliating Congregations

1. The 501(c)3 status of the church will have to be applied for under the new denomination.

2. New insurance policies will need to be written.
3. The congregation will need new by-laws.
4. The PC(USA) may only transfer a congregation to another reformed body. If a congregation wishes to become independent or affiliate with a non-reformed denomination, the presbytery will dissolve the congregation and a new church can then be started.