

GRACIOUS DISCERNMENT POLICY

November 10, 2015

INTRODUCTION

While affirming our essential unity as the body of Christ, it is recognized that there are times when a discernment for the need of separation becomes an imperative of conscience either for an individual or a congregation. Therefore, it is prudent to establish principles for discussion of separation and any potential action before they become necessary. In this way a decision-making process that remains faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ and our common bond in Him is affirmed.

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

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

While tangible issues of property and assets enter into any real consideration of requests for dismissal, it is affirmed that we are stewards of God's resources intended to be used for His honor and glory. Consequently, while the constitutional principle of church property "held in trust" is noted, neither the property nor its seizure should be a focal point in the

25 discernment process. The intent of this document is to delineate a process that is fair, clear,
26 and easily understood. While final decisions concerning requests for dismissal must be
27 made by the Presbytery, these guidelines will be helpful to all parties concerned and will
28 encourage openness and trust as they seek the will of Christ together.

29 **PROCESS**

30 When the session of a particular congregation votes to present its membership with a
31 request for a discernment inquiry, the clerk of session should immediately notify in writing
32 the Stated Clerk of Washington Presbytery. The matter will be referred to the Committee
33 on Ministry which will investigate and make an initial determination about whether an
34 Administrative Commission will be named or whether the church is given permission to
35 consider entering the discernment process.

36 A determination of "true church" status will be made by the Presbytery upon
37 recommendation of the Committee on Ministry. G4.0207

38 After the Committee on Ministry grants permission to consider entering into a discernment
39 process, the session shall call a congregational meeting to determine whether the church
40 should enter the discernment process.

41 At this meeting representatives of the session and the Presbytery in equal numbers will
42 speak to the issues.

43 The regular bylaws will govern the meeting. A simple majority of those present and voting
44 must support entering into this process.

45 Upon receipt of written intent, the Presbytery will invite the session to enter into a
46 mandatory covenant with the Presbytery for the purpose of prayerful discernment. Under
47 the covenant the session will commit to scheduling a congregational meeting for

48 consideration of dismissal between six months and a year after the date of the first
49 congregational meeting. The Presbytery, through the Presbytery Council, will appoint a
50 team of presbyters (to be known as the Pastoral Team) to represent the Presbytery and to
51 work alongside the session in consideration of any action. Together, the session and the
52 Pastoral Team will engage in mutual and shared prayer, seeking God's guidance and
53 direction.

54 Should the session decide to enter the covenant relationship, its responsibilities will
55 include the following:

- 56 1. The development of a plan of mission, describing what will be the church's ministry
57 outside of Washington Presbytery and the Presbyterian Church (USA) should the
58 congregation choose to withdraw from the Presbytery.
- 59 2. Commitment to an open process of congregational discernment in which minority
60 voices are heard and respected.
- 61 3. The development of a plan to minister to any minority constituency after the
62 congregational vote is taken.
- 63 4. Any members who were removed within one year prior to the date of the first
64 congregational meeting, except for death or request, will be allowed voice and vote
65 at the final congregational meeting. New members added during the remainder of
66 the discernment process shall not have voice or vote at the
67 final congregational meeting.

68 The session will be encouraged to invite members of the Pastoral Team to address their
69 regular meetings and to join them in prayer.

70 The Pastoral Team will be appointed by the Presbytery Council with Presbytery staff
71 (General Presbyter and/or Stated Clerk) serving as "ex officio" (voice, but no vote). Every
72 effort will be made to assemble a team that is perceived as fair.

73 While representing the Presbytery for prayer, information, and advice, the team is not an
74 administrative commission. It has no authority to take any action regarding the property
75 held in trust, pastoral leadership, session membership, or the moderator of the session.

76 The responsibilities of the Pastoral Team will include the following:

- 77 1. Praying for and with the session and congregation
- 78 2. Providing an open channel of communication with Presbytery bodies, including
79 Presbytery Council, the Committee on Ministry, 90 Ecclesiastical Affairs, and
80 the Trustees
- 81 3. Identifying and recanting predetermined outcomes according to our own will,
82 emptying ourselves of our own ego, and opening ourselves to discern God's voice
83 and will together
- 84 4. Advocating Biblical principles of church unity and reconciliation, Reformed
85 principles of connection in Christ, and participation in the Presbytery and the
86 Presbyterian Church (USA).

87 The session will invite members of the Pastoral Team to attend the congregational meeting
88 at which dismissal is considered. The moderator of the congregational meeting will offer
89 team members and Presbytery leaders the opportunity to speak on a balanced basis. The
90 congregational meeting to consider dismissal will be conducted according to the Book of
91 Order. All active members of the congregation will be encouraged to attend and to
92 participate in the meeting. Inactive members should also be invited to participate in the
93 meeting, but they must be informed that they will not be allowed to vote.

94 If the discernment process fails to reach a conclusion after one year, the session will
95 petition the Committee on Ministry for permission to call a congregational meeting to seek
96 an extension for an additional year of discernment. If the Committee on Ministry grants
97 permission to consider extending the discernment process, the session shall call a
98 congregational meeting to determine whether the church should continue the discernment
99 process for one year. The regular bylaws will govern the meeting. A simple majority of
100 those present and voting must support extending the process. The rules regarding the rolls
101 of active members specified for the initial congregational meeting shall continue during
102 this extended period.

103 **GUIDELINES**

104 When the congregation considers the question of requesting dismissal, it should be
105 understood and communicated clearly that responsibility for the division, dismissal, or
106 dissolution of churches lies with the Presbytery, "in consultation with their members." It is
107 also the responsibility of the Presbytery to develop strategy for the mission and witness of
108 the church in this geographic region. As a result, any final decision on a request for
109 dismissal or dissolution must be taken by Washington Presbytery as a whole.

110 Without abdicating its constitutional responsibility, Washington Presbytery designates a
111 Pastoral Team in order to work cooperatively with a local church considering a request for
112 dismissal. This Team will report to the Presbytery and may recommend action on any
113 congregational vote to request dismissal with church property.

114 In order for the Presbytery Pastoral Team to consider supporting such a request, these
115 guidelines should be followed:

- 116 1. The covenant between the session and the Presbytery, committing each to prayerful
117 reflection and fair and open discussion, must be kept.
- 118 2. Any congregational meeting to vote on a request for dismissal must be scheduled to
119 provide sufficient time for deliberate reflection, education, and participation by all
120 active members of the congregation.
- 121 3. With the scheduling of the congregational meeting, a letter from the Pastoral Team
122 will be sent to the active membership of the congregation introducing the Team and
123 explaining the discernment process.
- 124 4. While the quorum for congregational meetings is set by the Book of Order and
125 by the bylaws of the particular congregation, the Presbytery expects that a goal of
126 fifty (50) percent of the active membership will participate in the meeting. In order
127 for the active members to feel free to act based upon conscience, a written ballot for
128 voting will be used.
- 129 5. The tally of the vote will be attested to by the congregation and the Pastoral Team.
- 130 6. Requests for dismissal to another church body must specify a denomination or
131 governing body in the Reformed tradition.

- 132 7. There must be a plan of mission in place for the continuation of the work of Jesus
133 Christ in the geographical area of the congregation.
- 134 8. There must be a plan to support any substantial group voting in the minority that
135 desires to continue local ministry in the Presbyterian Church (USA).
- 136 9. At least seventy-five (75) percent of the active members voting must be in favor of
137 dismissal. If the vote passes but with a majority of less than seventy-five percent,
138 the Presbytery Pastoral Team will not recommend support for dismissal to
139 Presbytery. If a majority of seventy-five percent or greater votes to seek dismissal,
140 the Presbytery Pastoral Team will recommend consideration of dismissal of the
141 congregation with the property "held in trust." This recommendation will be made
142 based upon resolution of any outstanding debts and dedicated endowments and will
143 include all property, real and personal, without financial encumbrances.

144 If these guidelines are fulfilled, the Presbytery Pastoral Team will support and recommend
145 the proposed request to Washington Presbytery. The Pastoral Team will seek to make a
146 unanimous recommendation in regard to the fulfillment of "spirit" and "letter" of this
147 process. The Pastoral Team's vote will be reported with their recommendations to the
148 Presbytery.

149 The final decision on a request for dismissal by a congregation, the continuing ministry of
150 the Presbyterian Church (USA) in that region, and the divestment of of any property "held
151 in trust" will be made by Washington Presbytery at a properly announced meeting.

152 Washington Presbytery will have a first reading of any dismissal agreement at a Presbytery
153 meeting followed by a second reading of the agreement at a subsequent Presbytery meeting
154 before voting upon the document. At these meetings, representatives of the congregation
155 will be given opportunity to explain their request, and members of the Pastoral Team will
156 make their recommendations. Any decision will be made by Washington Presbytery based
157 upon its understanding and commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ expressed through
158 the Presbyterian Church (USA).