

A PROCESS FOR CONGREGATIONS OF BLACKHAWK PRESBYTERY CONSIDERING LEAVING THE PCUSA

Preamble

The Blackhawk Presbytery recognizes that we live in a complex and changing world. Therefore, we seek to come along side each other to serve the Lord by celebrating our common core belief that Christ died on the cross to reconcile us back to God. And to show God's grace to one another through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit with our brothers and sisters in Christ, striving to grow Christ's Church throughout the Blackhawk Presbytery's territory as one body.

The Blackhawk Presbytery is committed to walking along side Pastors, Sessions, and congregations that are considering dismissal from the Presbytery and PCUSA. No matter the outcome, we seek to have a gracious process as we recognize the Church as one body with many parts.

Introduction

This process is a response to action of the 218th General Assembly (2008) urging presbyteries to provide a procedure that exercises the responsibility and power "to divide, dismiss, or dissolve churches in consultation with their members" (Book of Order, G- 3.0301a) with consistency, pastoral responsibility, accountability, gracious witness, openness, and transparency.

This process is also in response to the reality that Blackhawk Presbytery has already experienced the separation and withdrawal of congregations from the presbytery and PCUSA, without really walking along side each other

However, this process begins with a sincere hope for reconciliation. We acknowledge the differences in our views as individuals and congregations, but we resolve to approach such differences with mutual respect and love for one another (G-1.0305) and viewing us as one body. Therefore, the first step of this two-part process is that a *Conversation Team* be appointed to join with the session and congregation of a church considering leaving the PCUSA in an extended period of prayer, study and conversation with the goal of resolution and reconciliation.

For the presbytery, the very practical questions to be asked and answered are *why does this congregation want to leave* and *what can we do to make them want to stay?* For the congregation, the practical questions to be asked and answered are *do we fully understand the impact leaving the presbytery and denomination will have on Church of Jesus Christ* and *are we aware of and ready to fulfill the obligations attached to departure?*

Our conversation begins with the humble acknowledgement that Jesus prayed that his disciples be united as a witness to him in the world (John 17), and that in the act of separating we deny Jesus' intent; our first prayers will be those confessing our brokenness and sinfulness. But in God's gracious forgiveness we believe that the Holy Spirit can bring reconciliation, and so our prayers will also be for healing and wholeness.

If this process should move to a second step which is to appoint an *Administrative Commission* to negotiate a separation, we understand that scripture calls us to seek to resolve our disagreements peaceably and avoid the harm that is done to the Gospel and the Church when Christians resort to civil litigation and witness to their brokenness rather than the love of neighbor and of enemies that Christ commands.

It is in the spirit of Christ's reconciling love and grace that we approach this process with a church considering departing from the presbytery and the PCUSA.

The Process

1. When it becomes evident to the Session or Pastor(s) or any other responsible source that a significant representation of a congregation wishes to discuss or is discussing dismissal from the PCUSA, the Presbytery's Commission on Ministry (COM) must be informed immediately. No further formal discussion of the issue is to take place at any meeting of the Session or congregation until a *Conversation Team* has been appointed by COM to join in dialogue with the Session and congregation. A failure of a church to take this first step may result in the following process being extended.
2. Upon being notified by a Session or Pastor or any other responsible source that a congregation may be considering dismissal from the PCUSA, the COM will, in a timely manner, appoint a Conversation Team (CT) to join with the Session and congregation for a minimum of six months of prayer, study and conversation. At least two members of the CT will participate in any conversation with the Session or congregation. It will be helpful if the members of the CT live in reasonable proximity to the church, and that some on the team share an understanding of the theological leaning of the congregation. (See Appendix 1 for a suggested list of subjects for prayer, Bible Study, and conversation during this period.)
3. The CT and Session will set the initial active membership of the congregation as reported to the Presbytery in the most recent annual statistical report filed previous to the initiation of Step One. The active membership of the congregation may be changed during this process in the following way:
 - a. Members may not be dropped or added except by mutual agreement of the Session and CT or Administrative Commission (AC) as identified below. Common criteria for dropping or adding members should be developed by the Session and CT/AC.
4. If at the end of the minimum six months' process of prayer, study and conversation, the Session wishes to continue seeking dismissal from the PCUSA, the presbytery will appoint an Administrative Commission (AC) (See Appendix 2). To provide continuity in the process some or all of the members of the Conversation Team may be appointed to the Administrative Commission along with additional members of Presbytery to meet the requirements of the Book of Order concerning the number and diversity of an Administrative Commission. (G-3.0109b)
5. The Administrative Commission will work with the church to achieve terms for dismissal. These terms will include a financial agreement based upon an amount per active member as reported to Presbytery in the most recent annual statistical report. (See Appendix 3 for factors that may be considered in establishing the dismissal fee.)
6. The financial agreement will cover all costs of the presbytery associated with the dismissal of the congregation, and will provide for mission within the geographic bounds of the presbytery as suggested by the Administrative Commission and validated by the Mission Strategy and Resources Board.
7. The Session will call a Congregational Meeting when an Agreement for Dismissal has been reached, at which time the Congregation will vote upon the Agreement. Thirty days prior to the Congregational Meeting the Session and AC will set the active membership. No further changes in active membership will be made until after the congregation and Presbytery have acted. Sixty percent (60%) of the established active membership must be present at the congregational meeting and seventy-five percent (75%) of those voting must concur in the request for dismissal to pass. Voting shall be by ballot or roll call. No absentee or proxy voting is allowed.

8. Upon approval of the Agreement by the congregation a first reading of the Agreement by Presbytery will occur at its next regular meeting. The vote upon the Agreement will take place at the subsequent meeting of Presbytery. All pertinent documents related to dismissal shall be made available to members of Presbytery two weeks in advance of the subsequent meeting. The vote on the Agreement must be without amendment or substitute motions. The vote will be by roll call with sixty per cent (60%) of the commissioners present voting in favor of the Agreement for passage.
9. The church can be dismissed with its property and, if desired their name, to another Reformed denomination. All original rolls, registers, minutes and historical records will remain the property of the PCUSA.
10. The real property of the dismissed church will revert to the Presbytery should the church seek dismissal to any other than a recognized Reformed denomination in correspondence with the PCUSA, or if the dismissed church chooses to become a congregation independent of any denomination, within ten (10) years of the date of dismissal from the Presbyterian Church (USA).
11. The dismissal process will conclude with a joint worship service at the church being dismissed in which members of both the church and the presbytery will participate. At this service a covenant will be signed that will commit both the congregation and the presbytery to continue working together in mission as the Body of Christ. (See Appendix 4 for samples of the documents to be signed and suggestions for the planning of the worship service.)

Appendix 1

PROPOSED CURRICULAR SCHEDULE For Churches Considering Dismissal from Blackhawk Presbytery

Month 1

Scripture: Romans 16:17-20; Luke 18:1-8; James 5:7-12

Article: “Staying In Without Giving In” by Arnold B. Lovell (Union, Richmond)

Scripture: Matthew 10:5-16; Philippians 2:1-18; I Corinthians 12 and 13

Article: “A Top Nine List for Remaining Presbyterian” by Howard Childers (HR)

Month 2

Scripture: Ephesians 4:1-16; II Corinthians 4; James 4:1-12

Article: “Reflections on Grace with Truth” by Louis Evans, Jr.

Meeting with Presbytery Staff (at which the procedure for dismissal will be reviewed, opportunities for genuine confession and repentance will be provided, and questions may be asked and answered.

Members of the Conversation Team will be present at this meeting to moderate and encourage the main goal of the process, which is reconciliation.)

Month 3

Scripture: John 17:6-26; II Corinthians 10; Jeremiah 32

Article: “The Spirit Has Not Left the Mainline” (a forum of leaders)

Scripture: I Corinthians 5; Titus 3:1-11

Article: “At the Crossroads” by James R. Edwards (Whitworth College)

Month 4

Scripture: John 10:1-18; Romans 12; Hebrews 12:1-13

Article: “Time to Quit?” by Roberta Hestenes (HR)

Meeting with Presbytery Trustees (at which the issues of property, the trust clause and other pertinent subjects may be discussed. Members of the Conversation Team will be present at this meeting to moderate and encourage the main goal of the process, which is reconciliation.)

Month 5

Scripture: I Timothy 4; Matthew 13:24-30

Article: “We Can Win If We Do Not Quit” a sermon by Calvin Marcum

Scripture: Matthew 5:13-16, 43-48; II Corinthians 6:14-7:1

Article: “Five Reasons to Stay in the PC(USA)”, by Robert R. Kopp (revised)

Month 6

Scripture: I Timothy 6:3-16; Hosea 3:1-5, 11:8-11; 14:1-9

Article: “Why I Am Re-Entering the Ministry of the P.C.U.S.A. by Edwin Rian

Scripture: Galatians 6:1-10; Matthew 7:1-6

Article: “From Which Boat Do We Fish” by Patrick Hartsock and Sharlyn Stare

Rubric for the Study of Scriptures

With the study and discussion of each of the passages prescribed, the following questions should be asked and answered:

- Within its context, what does the passage say to its original audience?
- What situational parallels may be drawn between the original and contemporary audiences?
- What does the passage say to our particular situation?
- How will we seek to obey and implement its lessons together?

Rubric for the Discussion of the Articles

With the reading and discussion of each article, the following questions should be asked and answered:

- From what theological/ecclesiological viewpoint does the author(s) write?
- What insight does the article offer to our own situation?
- How does the article help us to discern God’s will in our situation?
- How will we seek to implement its lessons together?

Appendix 2

Administrative Commission

- The authority of the Commission is to include:
 - Identifying, working with and providing continuing pastoral care for those members of a congregation wishing to remain with the PCUSA.
 - Recommending to Presbytery whether there is a continuing congregation of the PCUSA that should be awarded some, or all, of the property, assets, name and titles associated with the existing church.
 - Consulting with the leadership of a church and recommending to Presbytery an orderly dismissal of those wishing to leave and the terms of dismissal including transferring ministers, officers and members, and to recommend which, if any, of the property, other assets, name and titles may be acquired by the departing members.
 - Examining whatever records may be relevant including how money is held, title to property, insurance documents, corporate officers, corporate articles, bylaws and charters. (G-9.0408)
 - To act as the Administrative Commission determines is necessary to protect the interests of the Presbytery in this process and to retain legal counsel should that become necessary. This authority is granted with the affirmation of all parties that we wish to be guided by 1 Corinthians 6 to settle matters within the church refraining from either engaging legal counsel or resorting to civil action.

Appendix 3
FACTORS TO BE CONSIDER BY AN ADMINISTRATIVE COMMISSION
OF BLACKHAWK PRESBYTERY
WHEN SETTING A DISMISSAL FEE FOR A DEPARTING CHURCH

Factors to be considered:

1. The establishment of the financial agreement is the responsibility of the Administrative Commission.
2. The established financial agreement and terms for payment should be a fee that is fairly set, a fee that the departing congregation is capable of paying, and a fee that will not unduly constrain the ongoing ministry of the departing church.
3. The value of the financial investments of the departing church, including account balances, endowment funds, stocks and other investments shall be determined. An audit of church financial records may be necessary to set this value.
4. The amount of indebtedness owed by the departing church to Blackhawk Presbytery or any other PCUSA body must be identified and satisfied.
5. Indebtedness of the departing church to other institutions (banks, etc.) must be fully assumed by the departing church. Indebtedness is the ongoing responsibility of the departing church and is not to be considered as a factor reducing the church's financial agreement.
6. The intention and desirability of permitting the departing church to continue its ministry at its current location must be considered.
7. The financial agreement must cover all costs of the Presbytery associated with the dismissal of the congregation, and will provide for mission within the geographic bounds of the Presbytery as suggested by the Administrative Commission and validated by the Mission Strategies & Resources Board.
8. The fair market value of the real estate of the departing church may be established. A single appraisal agreed upon by both the Presbytery and the departing church may be used; or by the average of two appraisals, one obtained by the church one by the Presbytery may be obtained. In the latter case the cost of both appraisals will be paid by the departing church.
9. The impact on Blackhawk Presbytery of the loss of future mission and administrative contributions from the departing church will be considered. As the continuing ministry of the departing congregation must be enabled, so too must the continuing ministry of Blackhawk Presbytery.
10. The historical contribution that Blackhawk Presbytery and the departing church have made to the ministry of the other body.
11. The cost to the Presbytery of maintaining the facilities should the congregation seek to depart without property.

Appendix 4

A Suggested Covenant Between Blackhawk Presbytery and Dismissed Congregations

The intent of this process has been to encourage reconciliation between the Presbytery and the Congregation, with the goal of having the Congregation remain a part of the Presbytery.

However, we acknowledge that institutional reconciliation may not be the result. We therefore encourage that, should dismissal take place, the Congregation and representatives of the Presbytery, gather together in worship at the time at which the dismissal will take effect. The worship service will require joint planning, leadership and participation and, as part of that worship, the Congregation and Presbytery will enter into a Covenant that will promise and promote grace, mercy, peace and a commitment to the mission of the Church of Jesus Christ, whenever and however possible.

Such a covenant, to be shared as part of the service and signed by representatives of the Congregation and the Presbytery, may be modeled upon the following elements:

- We commit ourselves to continuing to seek ways in which we may work together to achieve the Great Ends of the Church.
- We commit ourselves to continuing to share the Good News of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, offering His invitation to salvation to our communities.
- We commit ourselves to praying for and seeking the good of one another and of our ministries.
- We commit ourselves to seeking partnerships in the practical ways we might meet the needs of our communities.
- We commit ourselves to be open to the work of the Holy Spirit as He transforms the Body of Christ into the Bride, fit and prepared for the return of the Bridegroom.

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