

## **A Process for Discerning God's Will In the Relationship Between Pittsburgh Presbytery and Congregations**

### **Core Values**

Pittsburgh Presbytery seeks to serve God by developing, encouraging, supporting, and celebrating our common ministry given to us by Jesus Christ. Our work is best accomplished in organic spiritual unity found in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (*2 Corinthians 13:14, Westminster Confession 6.054*).

We recognize that we live in a time when our unity in Christ is being tested and our ability to work together in mission is being tried. We covenant that even in times of disagreements and conflict we will seek to uphold one another, build up one another, respect one another, and love one another, to the end that the mission of Christ be fulfilled. Together we seek to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church, minimizing confrontations while we seek to discern and follow the will of Christ. (*Ephesians 4:1-6*)

Pittsburgh Presbytery is committed to pursuing God's mission in Christ with all of our pastors, sessions, and congregations. It is the intent 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 a broad understanding of God's mission with a graciousness befitting those who claim Jesus as Lord.

This discernment process describes what happens during steps 4-7 in the [Pittsburgh Presbytery Dismissal Policy](#).

### **If a Session Requests to enter into Discernment Concerning Departure from the PCUSA**

In all matters relating to this subject, the following three questions are paramount:

- a. Does this congregation sense God's leading to seek dismissal from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), or toward continued fellowship with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)?
- b. If the congregation believes God is leading it 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 the congregation believes God is leading it toward continued 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 Dismissal Policy requires that any Session considering dismissal from the denomination engage a defined process of mutual discernment with Presbytery to seek God's will. This requires significant time and energy. We believe that a matter of this magnitude deserves focused attention and prayer by the Presbytery, the Session, and the congregation, whatever the specific outcome may be.

## STEPS IN THE DISCERNMENT PROCESS

### 1. **Initial Consultation with the Pastor(s)**

The presbytery Discernment Team (DT) meets with the pastor (or pastors) to listen and explore issues from a pastoral and personal perspective. They may bring in a few key session representatives, if they believe that will be helpful. Questions to be discussed: What is the pastor's perspective of where the congregation is in its discernment? Where is the pastor in his or her personal discernment? What impact will a decision of the congregation to leave or stay in the PC (USA) have upon the pastor? What would be the repercussions if the pastor and congregation decide differently? Are there dynamics within the congregation that the DT needs to know in order to have a more effective discernment?

- Note: in this entire discernment process, the DT leads with honest, open questions rather than statements or declarations, indicating thereby its desire to *hear* what is happening, and the concerns that underlie it.

### 2. **Initial Consultation with the Session**

The session invites members of the DT to a session meeting to identify issues, concerns and possible ways to address them. The DT begins simply by seeking to build trust, and to assure the session that its role is to help in true discernment, not to try to convince the church to do this or not to do that. The DT inquires: What are the primary presenting issues? What has the session and congregation already done by way of discernment? Was the session unanimous in its decision to enter the discernment process? What is the session's sense of the church's history in relationship with Pittsburgh Presbytery? The general shape of the discernment process, as well as Presbytery's dismissal Policy, is discussed. The discernment process may vary slightly from church to church depending upon the particular context. The session assigns two elders to co-ordinate the scheduling of the remainder of the discernment process with the DT (meeting times and places, co-ordinating schedules, etc.).

### 3. **Meeting with the congregation**

The DT, with the two elders designated for this purpose, sets times and places for the DT to meet with members of the congregation, being cognizant to schedule meetings to involve as many members as possible. The DT meets to listen and ask critical questions in order to identify issues for further discussion. There are a minimum of three open meetings with the entire congregation. (Note: The DT may meet privately with particular groups or individuals if the need arises. It is important that all voices be heard, including those not prepared to speak publicly. The DT shares with the pastor(s) the full content of any such meetings, but does not name the sources of any particular comments.)

### **Suggested format for congregational discernment meetings.**

- **Meeting #1**- The main focus of this first meeting is to listen to the members of the congregation. After introductions the DT explains the purpose of the meeting and gives a quick overview of the discernment and dismissal process. It asks the congregation pertinent questions, including: What are the critical issues that need to be addressed, from the congregation's perspective? How are people feeling

about the session's decision to enter this discernment? What information have members already received? What information is needed for a wise and faithful decision to be made? What issues need to be clarified? What process issues need to be clarified? The DT encourages people to articulate reasons as to why they wish to stay with or to leave the PCUSA. A time of prayer and scripture reading begins and ends the meeting.

- **Meeting #2** – The main focus of the second meeting is to discuss and examine theological issues and perspectives that were identified in the first meeting. Biblical texts are engaged focusing on the critical issues that have been previously identified. Various perspectives are shared. It is important that all present listen to each other with open hearts and minds. Members are asked to specify what they have heard their fellow-members saying; those reports are compiled for ongoing reference. They are asked either to affirm that the DT has heard everyone and everything it needs to hear, or to identify who or what yet needs to be heard.
  - **Meeting #3**- The main focus of this meeting is for the group to explore the pros and cons of leaving or staying. Options are discussed. DT members may offer personal testimony as to why they are committed to staying in the denomination. Questions to be explored include: What are the benefits of staying? Of leaving? If leaving, what are the pros and cons of the various Reformed church choices? If staying, what would need to be done differently by congregation and/or presbytery in order to maintain a healthier relationship?
4. After no fewer than three open meetings of the congregation, the DT **meets with the session** to assess where matters stand. Together they determine whether further discernment with the congregation is needed, or if more information is needed. What did people hear? What did the session hear? Have all voices been heard? Is Christ remaining at the center of discussions? The session invites the congregation to enter into a season of prayer. The session commits to spend at least two weeks in prayer before any decision is made.
  5. The DT **meets separately with the pastor(s)** during this season of prayer. What did the pastor(s) hear? What concerns remain present for the pastor(s)? How can the presbytery be supportive of the pastor(s) and congregation?
  6. After at least two weeks of prayer the DT **meets again with the session**. Is the session ready to make any recommendation? Is more time needed? The DT and session discuss whether the session believes the congregation has been led by the Spirit to stay in the PCUSA, or whether the session believes it should call a meeting of the congregation to take a poll as to whether the church will move on to the next step in the Dismissal Policy.
  7. The DT reports the session decision to the Presbytery Executive Committee.
  8. The DT is present if a congregational meeting is scheduled to take a poll whether to pursue departure. The results of the poll are reported to the Executive Committee.

9. Depending on the poll outcome, the congregation continues or discontinues the dismissal process.

**When the Discernment Team Reports a Continuation of Fellowship**

After completing the required process, the DT makes a final report to the EC. If it has been decided that the congregation and the Presbytery are still called by God to continue in covenant relationship, the DT and the session work to name the “learnings” from the process, and to craft a covenant for a healthy relationship in the future.

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**Discernment Team Selection**

The DT is a three-person team, ordinarily one ruling elder and two teaching elders. It is nominated by presbytery’s pastoral leadership staff to an EC team selected for this purpose, which reports the selections to the Executive Committee. The branch minister (for the branch of which the congregation is part) is an additional member of the DT ex officio, and another presbytery minister participates in the initial DT consultation with the pastor(s) and session.