

## Diary of Discernment – Exploring FPCMH’s Continuing Relationship with the PC(USA)

### Prelude

#### 1995

Oct. 23 Policy on homosexuality and church leadership is passed by Session.

#### 2011

May 15 Session Highlights includes an additional page to explain Session’s position on the change of ordination standards that was recently ratified.

Nov. 30 Elders Jim Badgley, Judy Kipp and Sheryl Markley and Deacon Bob Kipp attended an informational meeting at Church on the Mall, Plymouth Meeting, PA., about the Covenanting Conference in Orlando, FL, Jan. 18-20, 2012

Dec. 12 Stated Session meeting: Session authorized Pastor Osborne and Elder McFarland to attend the Covenanting Conference.

Dec. 16 Session Highlights (a one-page summary of information from the session meeting which is distributed on the following Sunday) informed the congregation of session’s action.

#### 2012

Jan. 18-20 Covenanting Conference: Pastor Osborne and Elder McFarland attended the Fellowship Conference in Orlando, FL.

### Unofficial Discernment

Jan. 22 Sunday School class: Pastor Osborne presented an overview of Fellowship of Presbyterians (FoP) and the new denomination Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (ECO).

Feb. 13 Stated Session meeting: Pastor Osborne and Elder McFarland shared their observations and opinions from the conference In Orlando.

The Clerk of Session contacted the Clerk of Presbytery to clarify the role a pastor may take when a session explores possible dismissal to another reformed body.

Mar. 12 Stated Session meeting: Session decided to call a meeting April 15 at 1 pm for the sole purpose of discussing possible affiliation with ECO. All members will read the theology and polity statements published by ECO. Sessions also covenants to fast and pray before the meeting. The Director of Discipleship is asked to conduct a single Sunday school class to review the differences between our congregation and the denomination.

Mar. 18 Session Highlights informed the congregation of session’s action.

Apr. 15 Sunday School class: “How Did We Get Here – A Summary Introduction to Issues Facing the PC(USA)” was attended by approximately 80-100 people. The script and a sound file are available from the church’s website. Five additional in-depth classes were held starting April 29. The notes for all weeks can be downloaded from

[http://firstpresmtholly.org/First\\_Pres\\_Mt.\\_Holly/Discipleship\\_files/My%20Teaching%20Notes%202.pdf](http://firstpresmtholly.org/First_Pres_Mt._Holly/Discipleship_files/My%20Teaching%20Notes%202.pdf)

Called Session meeting: Following lunch elders shared their individual views of the differences between traditional reformed theology and evolving views of the denomination. It was decided call an informal meeting of all elders in the congregation (Elder Council) on April 29 to discuss the matter.

Apr. 16 Session and Deacons met together for devotions and prayer prior to their respective board meetings. Part of the devotional time was given to answering questions about the option of affiliating with ECO.

Stated Session meeting: Session moved that all ordained elders in the congregation (“Elder Council”) be invited to a meeting after services on April 29 to discuss our relationship to PC(USA) and possible affiliation with other reformed denominations.

Apr. 25 Pastor Osborne met with Regional Presbyter Wendy Baily to discuss the protocol for a congregation that is discerning whether or not to remain in the denomination.

Apr. 29 Sunday School class: “How Did We Get Here – From the Reformation to the Founding of America”. Attendance was approximately 20.

Elder Council meeting: Thirty-five elders and the pastor discussed the reasons our congregation would want to leave the PC(USA) and the merits of affiliating with ECO. The group recommended that Session approve a formal process of discernment and notification of presbytery.

May 6 Sunday School class: “How Did We Get Here – Presbyterianism in America: The Eighteenth Century.”

May 13 Sunday School class: “How Did We Get Here – Presbyterianism in America: The End of the Nineteenth Century”

May 14 Stated Session meeting: Session authorized Pastor Osborne to officially notify presbytery of session’s decision to begin the discernment process.

### **Official Discernment**

May 20 Sunday School class: “How Did We Get Here – Presbyterianism in America: The Triumph of Indifferentism”

Session Highlights informed the congregation of session’s action.

May 21 Meeting in Tom’s River with ECO rep and other interested congregations, attended by Elder Judy Kipp and Deacon Bob Kipp

May 23 Meeting between Regional Presbyter Wendy Baily and Pastor Osborne

May 27 Sunday School class: Discussion of “The PCUSA 2012: How We Got ‘Here’”, from The Layman Online.

- June 10 Stated Session meeting: Session members will review ECO application and narrative questions for the July meeting.
- June 17 Session Highlights informed the congregation of session's action.
- July 9 Stated Session meeting: Elders W. McFarland, E. Nicolette and J. Olsen will complete the narrative questions for the ECO application.
- July 15 Session Highlights informed the congregation of session's action.
- July 24 After session approval of the narrative questions by e-vote, the application was submitted to ECO.
- Oct. 15 Stated Session meeting: Session elected its representatives to the Monmouth Presbytery Discernment Team: Pastor Osborne, Elder Bill McFarland, Elder Kathy Badgley, Elder (resting) Judy Kipp, alternate Elder Sheryl Markley.
- Oct. 21 Session Highlights informed the congregation of session's action.
- Nov. 14 Discernment team meeting (1): Review of discernment steps to date and draft of presbytery's Gracious Discernment Policy.
- Nov. 19 Joint devotions and prayer with Deacons were followed by discussion of discernment process, financial ramifications and a possible timeline. Rev. Jean Pinto represented Monmouth Presbytery.
- Nov. 25 Session Highlights informed the congregation of the discernment discussion at its meeting.
- Dec. 6 Discernment team meeting (2): The team adopted a tentative schedule of informational activities for the congregation. These will include a letter to each member about the discernment process, two Town Hall meetings, and an advisory vote tentatively scheduled for April 14. The team also discussed comments voiced at the meeting of Monmouth Presbytery November 27 regarding the draft of the Gracious Discernment Policy.
- Dec. 10 Stated Session meeting: Session approved the sending of two representatives to the Fellowship of Presbyterians/ECO conference in Orlando FL, Jan. 30-Feb. 1, 2013.
- Dec. 16 Session Highlights informed the congregation its action.
- 2013
- Jan. 3 Discernment team meeting (3): Congregational letter was reviewed. Panel members for the January Town Hall meeting were selected.
- Jan. 14 Stated Session meeting: Session will provide lunch preceding the congregational meeting and Town Hall meeting.
- Jan. 17 Congregational letter with attachment sent via email and postal service to all members.

- Jan. 20 FPCMH team members began open office sessions during Sunday School hour for members who wish to ask questions in a less public setting.  
A question box was placed in the narthex to receive questions anonymously. Questions were answered at both Town Hall meetings.  
Session Highlights informed the congregation of session's preparations for the congregational meeting to be followed by a town hall on the discernment process on Jan. 27.
- Jan. 22 Monmouth Presbytery approves its Gracious Discernment Policy.
- Jan. 27 Congregational "town Hall" meeting to begin answering questions about the process. Panel members: Dr. M. Hess, Elder J. Kipp, Rev. T. Osborne, Rev. J. Wildrick (ECO/FPC Dunellen)
- Jan. 30-Feb. 1 Elder S. Markley attended the Fellowship of Presbyterians/ECO conference in Orlando, FL.
- Feb. 7 Discernment team meeting (4):
- Feb. 24 Congregational meeting with straw vote: Same panel. Rev. Osborne and Dr. Hess prepared their interpretation of Bible teachings on homosexuality. The Mount Holly team members also presented a chart with their interpretation of the theological differences between FPCMH, PC(USA) and ECO.
- Mar. 7 Discernment team meeting (5): The comparison chart was discussed. Presbytery representatives will provide the PC(USA) perspective on each issue.
- Mar. 11 ECO interview of Session
- Mar. 13 Letter from ECO accepting FPCMH as member congregation, pending release by Monmouth Presbytery
- Mar. 21 Discernment team meeting (6): The revised comparison chart was reviewed. With slight modifications it will be ready to send to the congregation immediately after Easter. The voting process was reviewed. The voting date will be moved to April 21 to allow for an additional Q&A session for the congregation.
- Congregational letter sent by mail to inform members of advisory vote.
- Mar. 24 Discernment Calendar published in worship bulletin. Absentee ballots were made available for any who could not be present at the advisory vote gathering.
- Mar. 31 Discernment Calendar published in worship bulletin and Weekly Update.
- Apr. 4 A revised comparison chart was sent to the congregation.
- Apr. 7 Discernment Calendar published in worship bulletin and Weekly Update.
- Apr. 7-12 Session members called all households in the congregation to remind them of the change of worship time on April 21 and the importance of their presence at the advisory vote.

- Apr. 9 Elders K. Badgley, J. Kipp and B. McFarland attended the Senior Luncheon to answer questions at each table during mealtime.
- Apr. 14 Discernment Calendar published in worship bulletin and Weekly Update.  
Notice of Prayer Vigil and sign-up wheel.  
Open Forum for congregation.
- Apr. 20 Prayer vigil, 12 noon through 12 noon Sunday
- Apr. 21 Combined worship service followed by Congregational advisory vote: From a membership of 243, 187 (77%) ballots were cast. Of that number 162 (87%) voted to leave the PC(USA) and move to ECO; 25 voted to remain in the PC(USA). Absentee ballots from 11 members were received; 8 voted to leave the PC(USA) with 3 choosing to stay. Results of the voting were told to those who remained during the voting. An all-church email was sent that afternoon. The results were also included in the Weekly Update the following Sunday (sent by all-church email with hard copies of all information provided on Sunday)
- Apr. 23 Discernment team meeting (7): The team unanimously decides to recommend to presbytery dismissal of the congregation to ECO at presbytery's June meeting.  
Presbytery meeting: The team reports the results of the congregational advisory vote.
- Apr. 28 Discernment information in Weekly Update
- May 5 Announcement of Congregational Care meeting  
Congregational care meeting with presbytery representatives for members who do not wish to transfer to ECO.
- May 5 Discernment information in Weekly Update
- May 12 Discernment information in Weekly Update
- May 16 Discernment team meeting (8): cancelled as unneeded
- May 19 Discernment information in Weekly Update
- May 26 Discernment information in Weekly Update
- May 30 Discernment team meeting (9): The team reviewed and edited a letter from presbytery to the members of FPCMH. The letter lists the possibilities for membership in case an individual does not wish to go with the congregation to ECO. The team also reviewed and edited the draft of the report to presbytery and additional supporting documents.
- June 2 Discernment information in Weekly Update
- June 9 Discernment information in Weekly Update: Summary of the report for Presbytery