

Discernment Team for First Presbyterian Church, Mount Holly

Report to Monmouth Presbytery

June 25, 2013

Recommendations:

- A. That First Presbyterian Church, Mount Holly, be dismissed to Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (ECO), effective November 1, 2013.
- B. That the Rev. Tim Osborne be dismissed to the Presbytery of the East (ECO), effective November 1, 2013.
- C. That, according to G-4.0204, upon enrollment of the congregation by the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians, Monmouth Presbytery relinquish its claim that the church's property is held in trust for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).
- D. That the Discernment Team for First Presbyterian Church, Mount Holly, be dismissed.
- E. That an administrative commission be formed to manage the process of dismissal as delineated in the Gracious Discernment Policy.

Background:

On May 14, 2012, the Mount Holly Session voted to notify the Presbytery of its intent to enter into a time of discernment with the Presbytery, to determine its future denominational affiliation. At the time, Monmouth Presbytery was completing a discernment policy which was eventually adopted on January 22, 2013. When the policy was adopted, it was announced that the following persons were appointed to serve on the Discernment Team for Mount Holly:

From Mount Holly: Rev. Tim Osborne, Elder Bill McFarland, Elder Kathy Badgley, Elder Judy Kipp

From Monmouth Presbytery: Elder Bill Faust (Red Bank), Rev. Jean Pinto (Yardville), Rev. Myrlene Hamilton Hess (Bayville)

This team had begun meeting informally in November 14, 2012, in anticipation of the passage of the presbytery's policy. The team met at least nine times and held two open congregational town meetings to discuss questions and perspectives (A member of ECO was also present at the congregational forums). In addition, Mount Holly members of the team offered a variety of opportunities for congregational members to converse about the matter at other times. ***On April 23, 2013, the Discernment Team voted unanimously to recommend dismissal.***

Mount Holly has been home to Presbyterians since at least 1767 when John Brainerd led a group of Presbyterians in what was then known as Bridgetown. That group later disbanded with the departure of Rev. Brainerd. Rev. John Plotts arrived in 1783 to begin the church that is now known as First Presbyterian Church, Mount Holly. The church was chartered in 1839 by the Presbytery of Philadelphia. As time went by and presbytery boundaries shifted, the church was at various times in West Jersey, Burlington, New Brunswick and Monmouth Presbytery (1870).

The First Presbyterian Church of Mount Holly has been known for many years as evangelical in the true sense of that word. With a strong sense of commitment to Christ, the congregation has not kept the good news hidden but has shared the Gospel holistically with the community in which it dwells. Some examples of this outreach to the broader community have included the Samuel Miller Christian Retirement Center, Homes of Hope, The Well, and Burlington Center Mall Ministry.

Theologically, the congregation and its pastors have tended to be on the conservative end of the Presbyterian spectrum. In 1995 the Session passed a policy called "Homosexuality and Church Leadership,"

which expressed the congregation's belief that Scripture affirms sexual behavior only within heterosexual marriage. At the time of its adoption, this policy was in concert with the denomination's stance. In recent years, as the PCUSA has broadened and become more inclusive in its perspective, there has been a growing sense of uneasiness on the part of the leadership of this church. When the language of what is now G-2.0104b was changed (eliminating the "fidelity and chastity" clause as an ordination standard), this became a flash point for the congregation. There became a strong sense that the PCUSA had gone "too far" and that the congregation could no longer serve within the PCUSA with integrity. The pastor and other leaders of the congregation entered into a serious time of discernment that began with a conversation in Session on May 15, 2011, related to ordination standards. The discernment continued with informational meetings, Sunday School classes, Council of Elders, and attendance at events sponsored by The Fellowship of Presbyterians and ECO. Following Session's action on May 14, 2012, Presbytery was notified of the Session's intent to enter into a time of discernment with the Presbytery. This was communicated through our Regional Presbyter Wendy Bailey. Because the Presbytery's policy was not yet complete, the discernment began informally until the policy was adopted. Meanwhile, the session made application to ECO to prepare for the possibility of joining that denomination and was accepted in March of 2013, pending dismissal. The pastor of the church, Rev. Tim Osborne, has applied to become a member of ECO's Presbytery of the East, pending dismissal from Monmouth Presbytery. The Discernment Team met at least 9 times for discussion of issues and to plan how to work with the congregation. An advisory vote of the congregation was taken on April 21, 2013.

In the discernment process, the presbytery members of the team interpreted the discernment policy. They were also careful to point out that from the perspective of the PCUSA, there was no need for the Mount Holly congregation to leave. The congregation could retain its conservative evangelical perspective and remain a congregation in the PCUSA, without being forced to ordain persons that they felt were unfit for ministry. The Mount Holly members on their part expressed concern not only for the present perspective of the PCUSA but also for the trajectory, and felt that they could not continue to move in this direction. The presbytery members of the team also expressed their appreciation for the congregation and its faithful participation in the work of the Presbytery through faithful committee involvement and through consistent mission giving and per capita payments.

In congregational forums, we all participated in various discussions about theology and practice, and presbytery members of the team discussed how it is that sincere, Bible believing Christians can also embrace the ordination of GLBT persons whom God may be calling to ordained ministry. Throughout this discussion, it seemed clear that the congregation and its leadership are not able to embrace the kind of diversity that others in the Presbytery celebrate as the movement of God in our midst. From their perspective, this movement is simply out of bounds with what the Bible teaches. A clear division was seen when as a team we attempted to describe the beliefs and perspectives of the PCUSA and compare these to the beliefs and perspectives of the congregation—the Mount Holly contingent presented a very different set of definitions than the other members of the team did. This is the key point on which our decision turned. On April 23, 2013, the Discernment Team voted unanimously to request that Monmouth Presbytery dismiss the Mount Holly congregation to ECO.

It should be noted that all discussions, even those where disagreement was profound, were gracious and reflected a high level of mutual respect.

Requirements in the Gracious Discernment Policy:

The following points respond to specific requirements in the Gracious Discernment Policy Section 3. B.:

1. Evidence of a "super majority" of the congregation: On April 21, 2012, the congregation gathered to cast its advisory vote. From a membership of 243, 187 (77%) secret ballots were cast. Of the votes cast, 162

(87%) voted to leave the PCUSA and move to ECO; 25 voted to remain in the PCUSA. This is well above the required 50% quorum and 2/3 majority vote. Further information was gathered through absentee ballots: 8 voted to leave and 3 voted to stay.

2. A plan related to church property: The church owns property which has been valued at \$3,000,000. There is no mortgage on the property and the deeds are all in the name of either the church or the trustees of the church. Because of the overwhelming majority of members who wish to leave the denomination, it is the collective wisdom of the Discernment Team that the building's best use is to remain in the hands of the congregation and recommends that the Presbytery relinquish its claim that the church's property is held in trust for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) as noted in the motion above, with no additional compensation beyond that which is listed in (B.5).

3. A specific plan to nurture and care for any congregation members who wish to remain in the PCUSA: Regional Presbyter Wendy Bailey and Elder Bill Faust held an open meeting for any congregation members who do not wish to leave the PCUSA. Congregation members may choose to join other nearby churches or may request that their membership be held by the presbytery temporarily as they decide where their membership should be. The relatively small number of dissenting members suggests that a new church start would not be fruitful in Mount Holly at this time.

4. Severance for pastors wishing to remain in the PCUSA – Not applicable.

5. The Session of First Presbyterian Church, Mount Holly has agreed to contribute to Monmouth Presbytery \$50,101.10, which represents 10% of the regular contributions to the church as reported under the category "Receipts" in the most recent annual statistical report to the General Assembly. This payment will be made no later than November 1, 2013.

6. The 2013 Per Capita apportionment and Mission Pledge will be paid no later than November 1, 2013.

7. Debt: The congregation has no debt.

Conclusion: As stated in our Gracious Discernment Policy, "it is Monmouth Presbytery's highest desire that every local congregation will serve the Lord Jesus Christ as fully and completely as possible." So it is with a mixture of gratitude, sadness and hope that we present these recommendations to Presbytery for its prayerful action. **Gratitude** for many years of shared ministry and faith. **Sadness** that the Mount Holly congregation no longer feels a sense of common vision and direction with the PCUSA. **Hope** that First Presbyterian Church, Mount Holly, and Monmouth Presbytery will both continue to serve the kingdom of God faithfully as God leads.

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