

# Gracious Discernment Policy of the Presbytery of Monmouth

## 1. Introduction

The mission of Monmouth Presbytery is *equipping ministers and congregations to strengthen God's people for ministry in obedience to Jesus Christ*. As such, it is Monmouth Presbytery's highest desire that every local congregation will serve the Lord Jesus Christ as fully and completely as possible. To be sure, service to God's Kingdom is of paramount importance for the community of faith.

Within our PCUSA denomination and in adherence to the Reformed tradition, we treasure the diversity within the unity of Christ's Church. Certainly our presbytery is no stranger to the tensions and divisions inherent to communities of disciples that hold a wide variety of perspectives regarding many important theological, missional, and institutional points of view. It is always our prayer and goal that these tensions will be addressed openly, honestly, and prayerfully. In doing so, we lay our trust in the Holy Spirit to help us work with our differences in a way that serves to bring us closer to the Lord and closer to each other. We believe in the oneness of Christ's Church and hold that Christ longs for his Church to be united. This is reflected in the connectional nature of our PCUSA denomination. In a "perfect PCUSA world" all of the diverse parts would seek to work together in the midst of differences.

However, we also acknowledge that a congregation may struggle with significant differences and because of that struggle, may desire to enter into a time of discernment about its future relationship with the presbytery and/or denomination. The intention of this policy is to facilitate and ensure the necessary discernment in such situations, including but not limited to, dismissal from the denomination.

## **2. Faithful Discernment Process**

A. When a local congregation's session experiences a level of dissonance in its relationship with the presbytery and/or the denomination that threatens to seriously interfere with the congregation's ability to serve the kingdom of God with integrity, it shall communicate to the presbytery its intention to *enter into a process of discernment with the presbytery regarding the future relationship between the congregation and the presbytery and/or the denomination*. The communication to the presbytery shall include specific reasons why the session believes it may be in the best interest of the congregation, the presbytery and the kingdom of God for the session and congregation to enter into this discernment process.

B. This request shall be submitted to the presbytery's Mission Council via the Stated Clerk's office.

1. Upon receiving said request, the moderator, in dialogue with the Mission Council, shall appoint three presbyters to a *Discernment Team*. The three presbyters appointed to the Discernment Team shall come from a pool of presbyters who have been trained and equipped to facilitate a local congregation's faithful discernment of its future relationship with the presbytery and/or denomination. These three presbyters will represent the presbytery to the congregation; all actions taken either by the session or the congregation on any matter associated with the discernment process shall be done with one or more of these three presbyters present; and the session shall disclose to all three presbyters the contents of all communications issued on any matter associated with the discernment process.

2. The session shall also appoint four members to the Discernment Team, including at least one pastor and at least two Session members.

3. The moderator shall inform the presbytery when a Discernment Team has been formed. The Discernment Team shall report on its progress to the presbytery at least quarterly.

C. Following the request to enter into the gracious discernment process, a congregation will enter into a process of discernment that is expected to take a minimum of six months to complete. The Discernment Team will negotiate a specific process with the session, which may include such components as Bible Study, discussion groups, forums, and town meetings. In seeking to "find and represent the will of Christ" (F-3.0204) in this matter the Discernment Team's objectives are to:

1. Notify the congregation by letter of its formation and delineate the process of discernment underway.

2. Pray with and for the session and congregation as they wrestle with difficult issues.
3. Listen & Learn
  - a. What are the presenting issues?
  - b. What are the underlying issues?
4. Offer honest, transparent answers to questions.
  - a. Speak openly and honestly to specific concerns, and
  - b. Offer clear understandings of constitutional issues, questions, and concerns.
5. Clearly delineate and interpret the process of *Gracious Dismissal*.
6. Provide background related to an understanding of property ownership as outlined in the Book of Order, especially G-4.0201 and G-4.0203. Though the property is held in trust for the entire denomination, it is acknowledged that the presbytery is given the stewardship of property decisions. A financial analysis will be arranged by the Discernment Team to determine the value of the church property.
7. Ensure that the entire congregation—leadership and congregants—have had ample opportunity to participate within the discernment process and to appreciate both the breadth and depth of the matter and the reasons for considering a change in the relationship with the presbytery and/or the denomination.

### **3. Report to Presbytery**

A. When at least 6 out of 7 members of the Discernment Team agree that the discernment process has been faithfully completed, they shall present a report to the presbytery, recommending one of the following:

1. That the congregation continue as a member congregation of the PCUSA with no additional action.
2. That an administrative commission be formed to work with the congregation.
3. That the congregation be dissolved.
4. That the congregation be dismissed to another Reformed Denomination.

B. The report shall include, at a minimum, an account of the discernment process and a clear rationale for its recommendation, taking into account the historic relationship of the congregation with the Presbytery and its work for the kingdom of God. In the case of recommendations #3 and #4, it shall also include:

1. Evidence that a “super majority” of the congregation concurs with the dissolution or dismissal. This shall be accomplished as follows:
  - a. The Session will call an advisory meeting of the congregation, giving adequate notice to all members in the same manner as if it were a called meeting of the congregation. It is expected that at least the following will be present at this meeting:
    1. 50% of the active membership of the congregation, as reported to the General Assembly in the most recent statistical report, *or*
    2. 75% of the average worship attendance, as reported to the General Assembly in the most recent statistical report.
  - b. An advisory vote shall be taken by paper ballot on the matter of either dismissal or dissolution. A 2/3 of majority of those present must vote in approval in order for the Discernment Team to request either dismissal or dissolution.
2. A specific plan related to the church property, which shall include a recommendation of appropriate compensation from the congregation to the Presbytery. This compensation is to be considered relative to the historic relationship of the congregation to the Presbytery; the intent, however, is that this compensation should not hamper the congregation’s ongoing mission.

3. A specific plan to nurture and care for any congregation members who wish to remain in the PCUSA.

4. An agreement from the congregation to provide a one-year severance package from the congregation to any installed pastors who wish to remain in the PCUSA.

5. An agreement from the congregation to contribute to the presbytery 10% of “regular contributions” to the church as reported under the category “Receipts” in the most recent annual statistical report to the General Assembly. This may be paid over a three-year-period, if so negotiated with the Discernment Team.

6. Confirmation that the congregation has paid its full current year per capita apportionment and mission pledge.

7. Confirmation that the congregation has eliminated any debt for which any entity of the PCUSA may be held accountable (prior to dismissal).

C. In the event that presbytery votes to either dismiss or dissolve a congregation, an administrative commission shall be formed to manage the process.

#### **4. A Call to Prayer**

We trust God's Holy Spirit to guide us, even in this difficult discernment process. So we challenge one another to pray:

\* for congregations and individuals, that they may be guided to decisions that keep them in a strong and faithful relationship with Jesus Christ and his ministry, and

\*for the PCUSA, that we may continue in worship and in work that pleases Jesus Christ and builds God's kingdom.