

**A Process for Discerning God's Will
In the Relationship Between
The Presbytery of Donegal and Its Member Congregations
When Member Churches are Questioning Whether to Remain in the
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)**

If a Session/Congregation is Considering Requesting a Discernment Team for Potential Dismissal

In all matters relating to this subject, the following three questions will be deemed paramount:

- a. Is God leading this particular congregation to seek dismissal from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) or toward restoration of fellowship with the PC(USA)?
- b. If God is leading this congregation to seek dismissal from the PC(USA), how can this be accomplished in a way that honors our Lord Jesus Christ and strengthens both the congregation and the Presbytery?
- c. If God is leading this congregation toward restoration of fellowship with the PC(USA), how can this be accomplished in a way that honors our Lord Jesus Christ and strengthens both the congregation and the Presbytery?

The Presbytery requires that any session seeking or considering dismissal from the denomination covenant with the Presbytery to enter into a defined process of mutual discernment to determine God's purpose. Seeking God's will require significant time and energy. We believe that a matter of this magnitude deserves focused attention and prayer by the Presbytery and local congregation whatever the specific outcome may be. From the time the Leader Team is notified, the process will take no less than nine months and often will extend beyond one year.

The Presbytery is committed to this process and covenants to avoid litigation wherever and whenever possible. In fulfillment of Resolution 04-28 adopted by the 218th General Assembly, we recognize that the exercise of the process to *"divide, dismiss, or dissolve churches in consultation with their members"* (Book of Order, G-3.0301a.), if accomplished by litigation, *"is deadly to the cause of Christ ... and our witness to Christ in the world around us."* Therefore, we will carefully follow our Guiding Principles.

Steps in the Discernment Process

1. Consultation with Presbytery Representatives

A session wishing to initiate this procedure shall invite members of the Presbytery Leadership Team or their designees to a meeting of the Session to identify issues and all possible ways to address them.

2. Required Conversations and Training

Prior to voting whether to enter the formal Discernment for Dismissal process, there are four required conversations. At least 2/3 of the Session, along with all teaching elders, must attend each conversation. These are open gatherings and all members of the congregation are invited and encouraged to attend.

a. *Orientation and Guiding Principles*

At this meeting, presbytery representatives and the Session will commit to our Guiding Principles, study God's Word together, and enter into a prayer covenant together. The session shall be oriented to the Discernment Process and Dismissal Policy

b. *What is Discernment?*

Practical Training will be offered in the methods of discernment as a way that we discover together God's will during times of disagreement and contention.

c. *How Can You Think That Way?*

The Presbytery will conduct a conversation called "*How Can You Think That Way? Conversations on Biblical Authority.*" The purpose of this gathering is to make sure that all involved in the upcoming discernment process have the opportunity both to be heard and to listen to different viewpoints on contentious issues, and to understand the ranges of opinion held by people of good faith on key matters.

d. *Why Stay in the Presbytery of Donegal and the PC(USA)?*

In this conversation, members of the Presbytery offer reasons for remaining in the current covenant relationship between Donegal Presbytery and the congregation. At this meeting the Presbytery will also meet with any in the congregation who would like information about remaining in the PC(USA).

3. If the Session Wishes to Vote to Enter the Discernment Process

- a.** It is the hope of the Presbytery that the result of these conversations and the partnership of the Presbytery will result in a decision of the Session to remain in the Presbytery of Donegal and to continue our partnership to serve our one Lord Jesus Christ together. If, after these required consultations, the Session still wishes to vote whether to enter this Discernment Process, the matter may be put to a vote at a special Session meeting called for this purpose. If the majority of the Session votes to initiate the discernment process, the Clerk of Session shall inform the Leader Team of this decision in writing.
- b.** The Leader Team will respond with a written acknowledgement, and inform the Session of the start date of the discernment process. This start date may depend upon whether there are currently other congregations in the discernment process.
- c.** The Session will remit a payment to the Presbytery of Donegal for \$1,000 to cover expenses related to the Discernment Process.

- d. The Session shall sign an Agreement to follow all requirements of the Discernment Process, and the Dismissal Policy if invoked.
- e. Both parties may then begin the work of recruiting member representatives for a Discernment Team.

4. Constitution of the Discernment Team

The Discernment Team shall consist of four representatives from the church and four representatives from the Presbytery. The Session of the congregation shall choose the representatives from the church, reporting this information to the Presbytery Stated Clerk. The pastor/moderator of the congregation serves as an ex officio member, but is not a member of the Discernment Team. The Presbytery Leader Team shall choose representatives from the Presbytery, ensuring parity between Teaching Elder and Ruling Elder representatives.

The Presbytery Leader Team shall appoint the Moderator, whose purpose is to facilitate the conversation. The Moderator shall have an equal voice and vote with the other members of the Discernment Team. The Executive Presbyter, the Moderator of the Presbytery, the Stated Clerk and Associate Stated Clerk of the Presbytery shall be ex officio members of the Discernment Team and shall attend meetings as available. The Moderator of the Discernment Team shall make sure that the Discernment Team receives appropriate orientation to include reviewing the process, the history of the Presbytery in relationship to the congregation, and the larger issues surrounding this particular process.

5. The Discernment Process

The Discernment Team shall conduct a preliminary meeting. At this meeting a recording clerk shall be appointed. Minutes shall be kept of all proceedings of the Discernment Team. This orientation shall outline issues, including assessing the willingness of the Session and congregation to engage in genuine discernment. Based upon the outcome of this meeting, the Discernment Team will design a proposed discernment process, including projected number and scope of meetings. The Discernment Team must meet at least one additional time, and there must be at least one consultation with the Discernment Team and the congregation. The proposed process shall be sent to the Leader Team for information.

A recommended structure is as follows. The Discernment Team is empowered to modify this structure to meet the needs of the particular situation. It is up to the discretion of the Discernment Team whether or not to invite members of the congregation to observe meetings of the Discernment Team, and whether they shall be invited to speak at these meetings. The meetings to which the congregation is invited shall be publicized to the congregation. When

possible, the Discernment Team should gather around table and break bread together. Worship and Bible Study/Dwelling should be a component of every meeting.

a. First Meeting

During the first meeting, Discernment Team members exchange extended introductions, sharing a portion of their faith stories and their understanding of the spiritual and theological issues at stake in the conflict between the church and the Denomination/Presbytery. The first meeting is primarily a time where members of the team begin to listen to each other. It is advised that this be a meeting of the team only.

Guiding Principle: Scripture teaches us to “honor everyone (1 Peter 2:17).” We recognize each participant in this process as a child of God, possessing a conscience formed by the Spirit of Christ under the guidance of Scripture. Presbyterian tradition recognizes that there are “truths and forms with respect to which persons of good character and principle may differ” and with regard to these differences, it is our Christian duty “to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other” (F-3.0105).

b. Second Meeting

The second meeting consists of a discussion of the relationship between the congregation and the Presbytery, including a conversation of shared events between the congregation and Presbytery and a sharing of how those events have been interpreted by various parties. We will celebrate the stories of where the partnership has been strong, and also where there is grievance and alienation not yet reconciled.

Guiding Principle: We are called by Scripture to view our history through the lens of faith, seeking to discern God’s redemptive work in our own history in Jesus Christ. In this process, we lay before God the history of the congregation and the Presbytery, asking God to guide, reveal, honor, redeem, lead, and forgive.

Estrangement and alienation between Christians are a consequence of sin. We cannot say to one another “I do not belong to the body” or “I have no need of you” (1 Corinthians 12:14, 21).

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:8).

All of us must be willing to hear from each other the ways that we have hurt, excluded, and offended. Then we must admit our sin and ask God and one another for the grace of

repentance and the mercy of forgiveness. All of us must be willing to exercise the spiritual discipline of gratitude, and celebrate our shared history.

c. Third Meeting

The third meeting consists of a guided dialogue, facilitated by the moderator of the Discernment Team, on foundational theological issues. Members are invited to share their personal understanding of various theological issues. The purpose of this discussion is to determine how much common theological ground exists between the congregation and the Presbytery/denomination. Are the theological differences confined to certain issues or do the conflicts run deeper to ecclesiological, Christological, or other foundational theological issues?

Guiding Principle: We are called to exercise our values of listening, humility, forbearance and respect. We will humbly explore together our understandings of the essential tenets of our reformed faith, and discern where we have a common understanding, and where our differences might be so core as to demand the ending of our historic covenant.

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1-6)

d. Fourth and Subsequent Meetings

The content of the fourth and subsequent meetings shall be determined mutually by the members of the Discernment Team. In planning these meetings, the team will consider feedback received from congregants who have observed the discernment process.

It is the Presbytery's hope that through this process we will remember the consolation we have from love, the sharing in the spirit we have enjoyed, and the compassion and sympathy we have for one another. Further we will strive to do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than ourselves. We will not look to our own interest but to the interest of others.

Above all else, we will seek to have within us the mind of Christ who came as servant to all. (Phil. 2:1-7)

When the Discernment Team Recommends Restoration of Relationship

After completing the required sessions, the Discernment Team shall make a report and recommendation to the Session and to the Leader Team regarding the future of the relationship

between the Presbytery, the PC(USA) and the congregation. If the Discernment Team perceives that the congregation and the Presbytery are still called by God to continue in covenant relationship, it shall recommend restoration of fellowship between the congregation and the Presbytery. The Discernment Team and the Session shall work together to craft a process to celebrate shared history and vision, acknowledge past differences, confess sin, seek reconciliation, and covenant for healthy relationships in the future.

The following minimal guidelines for marking and sealing that recommitment shall be followed:

1. The Discernment Team shall meet with the Session to chart a course for the future relationship between the Presbytery and the congregation. Issues that have been raised in the course of discernment shall be included in the ongoing conversations between the two parties. The Discernment Team shall make every effort to arrive at resolutions that restore the integrity and appreciation of the covenant relationship that the congregation shares with the Presbytery. Members of the Presbytery Leadership Team and the Connecting Our Ministry Committee will be available, as appropriate, to address concerns.
2. Presbytery representatives and the Session shall conduct a public service of worship and recommitment to shared fellowship and ministry.
3. The testimony of members of the Discernment Team and congregation may be shared at the congregational and Presbytery level.
4. Those who for reasons of conscience determine they must depart from the congregation shall be blessed and commissioned in the hope of maintaining bonds of peace.

When the Discernment Team Recommends Dismissal to Another Reformed Body

If, after completing this process, the Discernment Team believes that the wisest course for the congregation and the Presbytery is no longer to continue in covenant relationship and recommends dismissal to another Reformed body, it shall follow the Dismissal Policy of the Presbytery of Donegal.