

**PRESBYTERY OF WABASH VALLEY
5288 N OLD US HWY 31
ROCHESTER IN 46939**

**POLICY FOR PROVIDING EXCEPTIONAL CARE,
COMMUNICATION, AND GUIDANCE TO CONGREGATIONS
DISCERNING THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO THE PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH (USA)**

ADOPTED BY THE PRESBYTERY ON FEBRUARY 21, 2006
REAFFIRMED BY THE PRESBYTERY COUNCIL ON MAY 15, 2007
REVISED BY THE PRESBYTERY COUNCIL ON JULY 5, 2007

A: Presbytery Policy:

Whereas the Presbytery of Wabash Valley (PWV) believes strongly that remaining loyal to the Presbyterian Church (USA) (PCUSA) is the best way to carry out our calling and commitment to Christ, as well as our commitment and vows to the PCUSA, and

Whereas the “property clause” of G-8.0201 is valid and binding on all congregations of the Presbytery, and

Whereas clergy and officers who advocate congregational withdrawal from the PCUSA are violating their ordination vows to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church and abide by the church’s polity,

The Presbytery establishes the following process for dealing with churches discerning their relationship with the PCUSA.

- 1) The Presbytery shall be pro-active in preparing materials, training people, and publicizing a positive statement of the reasons and benefits why congregations and members should continue to serve Christ within the PCUSA.
- 2) If the Council identifies a congregation as being one that is discerning its relationship with the PCUSA, it shall form and send to that congregation a Review Team.
 - a) The Review Team would be prepared to state the Presbytery’s position, and work with the session and/or congregation to either persuade its leaders to stay loyal, or, if they appear determined to leave, to ascertain whether the congregation and its leaders are willing to work in good faith toward a mutually-agreeable resolution, as defined in § 3) below.

- b) The Review Team would have all the powers of an Administrative Review Team under G-9.0408. It would not, however, be an Administrative Commission, and would not have power to negotiate settlement matters on behalf of the Presbytery.
 - c) At the conclusion of its work, the Review Team will report to the Council or Presbytery (whichever meets sooner) on its findings, and make a recommendation as to whether an Administrative Commission should be formed for this church.
 - 3) Working in good faith toward a mutually agreeable resolution includes that:
 - a) The congregation's clergy and officers are open and honest in all their dealings with the Presbytery.
 - b) The congregation's clergy and officers provide all requested information and documents to the Review Team or Administrative Commission on a timely basis.
 - c) The congregation's clergy and officers are willing to protect the rights of the officers and members who desire that the congregation remain loyal to the PCUSA, or who desire to remain congregants of another PCUSA church.
 - d) The congregation's clergy and officers refrain from any unauthorized unilateral changes in the way their assets are held or managed.
 - 4) If the Review Team determines that a congregation seeks to work in good faith according to these criteria, it shall recommend formation of an Administrative Commission empowered to work with the congregation toward a mutually agreeable resolution. This Administrative Commission shall, however, have the power to take appropriate actions if the process breaks down.
 - 5) If the Review Team determines that a congregation intends to separate from the PCUSA, and its leaders are not willing to work in good faith toward a mutually-agreeable resolution under § 3) above, it shall recommend formation of an Administrative Commission empowered to take all appropriate and necessary action to safe-guard the denomination's ownership interest in property and to discipline any clergy and officers who have violated their ordination vows, including any proceedings needed in church or secular courts.
 - 6) If a Review Team recommends that an Administrative Commission be formed for a particular congregation, the Council shall form it as quickly as possible, using (to the extent possible) people who have been trained to serve on such commissions, and who live in reasonable proximity to the particular church.

B: Implementation:

1. Identifying “At Risk” Congregations:

The Council shall identify churches that may be discerning their relationship to the PCUSA.

2. Forming Response Teams:

To implement this policy, and because a number of teams and commissions may be needed on short notice, the Council should immediately train people to be in a “pool” ready to serve on one or more of the following:

1. Information Team: This team would be ready to respond to requests from sessions for information. It would develop appropriate hand-out materials. The goal would be to make a positive statement about the importance and value in remaining loyal to PCUSA. This positive information should be disseminated to every church, along with an offer to provide a speaker. Members of the team may be sent individually or in pairs to visit with churches who seek further information.

2. Review Team: Each team would be prepared to state the Presbytery’s position, and work with sessions and/or congregations to either persuade them to stay loyal, or, if they appear determined to leave, to determine if the congregation and its leaders are willing to work honestly and openly toward a mutually-agreeable settlement, as outline above. Members should understand clearly the limited role of the Review Team vis-à-vis an Administrative Commission.

3. Administrative Commission: These Commissions would need to work intensively with a session and congregation—with those congregations who are willing to work with the Presbytery, and taking appropriate steps with those sessions and congregations who are not willing to work with the Presbytery.

3. Establishing an Expedited Process for Considering Requests for Review Teams and Administrative Commissions:

1) Quick response will be essential. The Council should consider establishing an expedited process for taking action on requests for Review Teams and Administrative Commissions. Such a process might involve telephone consultation, e-mail consultation, etc.

2) Council should immediately prepare, with advice from the Office of the General Assembly, suggested provisions for the Review Teams and Administrative Commissions contemplated in this policy, so that a sound basis for well-drafted, individually-tailored authorizations are ready when and if they should be needed.

Appendix

Guiding Principles:

- The Kingdom of God, and the one “holy catholic church,” are broader than any one denomination. Nevertheless, as Presbyterians, we have committed to our particular Presbyterian expression of the universal church.
- We are deeply connectional: *“Each particular church of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shall be governed by this Constitution. Its officers are ministers of the Word and Sacrament, elders, and deacons. Its government and guidance are the responsibility of the session. It shall fulfill its responsibilities as the local unit of mission for the service of all people, for the up building of the whole church, and for the glory of God.”* G-4.0104
- As ordained officers of the PCUSA, we have vowed to be governed by our denomination’s polity, to be subject to its discipline, and to work for the peace, unity, and purity of the church.
- The following principle has been an important part of our heritage: *“That when any matter is determined by a major vote, every member shall either actively concur with or passively submit to such determination; or if his conscience permit him to do neither, he shall, after sufficient liberty modestly to reason and remonstrate, peaceably withdraw from our communion without attempting to make any schism.”* G-6.0108b Note 1.
- Under the “trust clause” of our constitution, congregations hold property in trust for the denomination: *All property held by or for a particular church, ... whether legal title is lodged in a corporation, a trustee or trustees, or an unincorporated association, and whether the property is used in programs of a particular church or of a more inclusive governing body or retained for the production of income, is held in trust nevertheless for the use and benefit of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).* G-8.0201
- Decisions as to use and disposition of church property come to the presbytery, which is a “steward” of the property held in trust by congregations. The presbytery cannot ignore its stewardship responsibilities with regard to such church property.
- Those who may feel called to separate from our denomination are nevertheless our brothers and sisters in Christ. Many have been faithful Presbyterians for years. They do not take this step lightly, but only after considerable prayer and exploration of alternatives.
- Within congregations who feel called to separate there may be persons who prefer to remain part of the PCUSA. The rights and interests of such persons must be protected.
- Our presbytery, many of our churches and even our denomination are in a critical time. Decades of decline have weakened us and turned us inward. Fighting amongst ourselves has exacerbated this problem. Interminable internal debates have distracted us from Christ’s call to share the gospel with those outside our walls.

- If a congregation's wish to separate triggers a lengthy and acrimonious battle, both that congregation and our presbytery will be weakened and further distracted from responding to Christ's call. Therefore, it is in the interests of the presbytery and of potentially separatist congregations to try to work things out peaceably, so that each may be freed to get on with the business of sharing the good news of the gospel.

Given these principles, here is a brief outline of the presbytery's position. The presbytery will:

- Be prepared to present a positive statement about the reasons for loyalty to the PCUSA, and will have people trained to make this presentation to churches.
- Clearly affirm that it honors the Book of Order provisions on church property and on the duty of clergy and officers to maintain their ordination vows.
- Will ascertain which congregations are at risk of seeking separation, and seek to work with such congregations to present the Presbytery's position, to ascertain congregational intent, and to protect the rights of persons loyal to the PCUSA.
- If a congregation appears intent on separating, the presbytery will offer to work with it toward a mutually agreeable settlement, provided that the congregational leaders communicate fully, work in good faith, and protect the rights and interests of persons loyal to the denomination.
- Be prepared to take all appropriate actions to preserve property and exercise appropriate discipline where congregations seek to separate and are unwilling to work in good faith toward a mutually agreeable settlement.