

A Process for Discerning God's Future for the Relationship Between the Presbytery of Yellowstone and Our Congregations Experiencing Disaccord With the Presbyterian Church (USA) ¹

The Presbytery of Yellowstone seeks to serve God by developing, encouraging, supporting, and celebrating our common ministry given to us by Jesus Christ. Our work is best accomplished in organic spiritual unity found in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13:14).

We recognize that we live in a time when our unity in Christ is being tested and our ability to work together in mission is being tried. We hope that even in these times of disagreement and conflict we will seek to uphold one another, build up one another, respect one another, and love one another, to the end that the mission of Christ be fulfilled. Together we seek to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church, minimizing confrontations while we seek to discern and follow the will of Christ.

When congregations find themselves in disaccord with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Presbytery of Yellowstone, there is a need to carefully discern ways to address this situation. The goal of this process of discernment is reconciliation and continued relationship for all congregations within the Presbytery. We take seriously the admonition of Christ to "first be reconciled to your brother or sister" (Matthew 5:24). Our hope for this process is in Jesus Christ our Cornerstone, in whom "the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God" (Ephesians 2:21-22).

Faithful Affirmations

With the earliest Christians the Presbytery of Yellowstone believes that **Jesus Christ is Lord** (Philippians 2:11) and **Head of the body, the church** (Colossians 1:18). We believe that the church, the body of Christ, has many members and yet is one, "**for in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body**" (1 Corinthians 12:12-13). We believe that Jesus Christ has reconciled us to God and given us the **ministry of reconciliation** (2 Corinthians 2:18).

With the whole Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Presbytery of Yellowstone believes:

The Church of Jesus Christ is the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all of humanity.

a. The Church is called to be a sign in and for the world of the new reality which God has made available to people in Jesus Christ.

b. The new reality revealed in Jesus Christ is the new humanity, a new creation, a new beginning for human life in the world:

(1) Sin is forgiven.

(2) Reconciliation is accomplished.

(3) The dividing walls of hostility are torn down.

c. The Church is the body of Christ, both in its corporate life and in the lives of its individual members, and is called to give shape and substance to this truth. (F-1.0301)

In establishing this process the Presbytery of Yellowstone affirms the following guidance:

(1) "The unity of the Church is a gift of its Lord and finds expression in its faithfulness to the mission to which Christ calls it." (F-1.0302a)

(2) “Visible oneness, by which a diversity of persons, gifts, and understandings is brought together, is an important sign of the unity of God’s people. It is also a means by which that unity is achieved. (F-1.0302c)

(1) “While divisions into different denominations do not destroy this unity, they do obscure it for both the Church and the world.” (F-1.0302a)

(2) The one Body of Christ, which is “the Church living under the one Spirit of God known through Christ,” has “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all (Ephesians 4:5-6).” (F-1.0302a)

Discerning Processⁱⁱ

This discerning process is based on the willingness of all parties to join together in discernment of God’s will and to work towards a mutually agreeable implementation of what they discern God’s will to be. That requires a high level of trust, communication, openness, and love. Mutual respect, deep conversation and prayer form the basis of the two phases of the discerning work of the congregation with the Presbytery: a time of listening and a time of resolution.

Phase One: A Time of Listening

When the leadership of the presbytery becomes aware through formal actions or informal contacts that a congregation or its leadership are seriously questioning their continued relationship with the Presbytery or the PC(USA), the Pastoral Ministry Team will initiate a pastoral visit by a Pastoral Team.

This awareness may happen in a variety of ways. A pastor may voice his or her deep dissatisfaction over denominational developments; a session may wrestle with issues of conscience concerning its relationship to the PC(USA), or an elder may approach the Pastoral Ministry Team or presbytery staff with questions about the expressed intent of the congregation’s leadership. If a session docket to begin deliberations on its disaccord with the PC(USA) and possible separation, the clerk of session shall notify the Stated Clerk of the presbytery immediately. Presbytery representation shall be invited to that session meeting through the stated clerk; the Pastoral Team shall be invited to subsequent meetings at which the topic is scheduled for discussion.

Members of the Pastoral Team will be selected and trained by the Pastoral Ministry Team (PMT). Team size and membership will vary according to situation and will depend on the number of people or groups with which the team will be meeting. The work of the listening teams will be supervised by the PMT.

The purpose of the Pastoral Team is three-fold:

- to listen to the concerns of the leaders and congregation;
- to express the concerns of the Presbytery; and,
- to engage in developing a process for mutual discernment of God’s leading that involves the congregational leaders, the congregation and the Presbytery.

An important goal of this phase is to ensure that all voices are heard, including the smallest of minorities. The Pastoral Team will ensure a safe forum, free from pressure and intimidation, for all to express their thoughts and feelings.

In order to provide a safe forum and work toward our goal of reconciliation, continued relationship, and healing that visible unity requires, this time of listening will be guided by the following principlesⁱⁱⁱ:

An expectation that God desires to guide us: Our encounters with each other must rest on our conviction of God’s deep desire to be known to us and to be made known by us. Therefore openness in prayer to the God present with us at all gatherings is essential.

A willingness to listen: Recognizing that we are created in God's image and for friendship, we believe we have an ability to hear and respond to God. We must be willing to listen and to speak from the heart in response to the promptings of God's Spirit. We must also be open to the ways God speaks to us through others. In fact, we need the listening hearts of others, especially those with whom we may disagree, to be able to fully and accurately hear God. Realizing we have a capacity to deceive ourselves, we can trust the Spirit dwelling within us and within our sisters and brothers to help us remain honest, open and alert.

Respect for conscience: 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 characters and principles may differ” and with regard to these differences it is our Christian duty “to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other. (F-3.0105)

An openness to the grace of repentance: 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 Cor 12:14, 21). 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 for the grace of repentance and the mercy of forgiveness.

A response of obedience: Gratitude for God’s forgiveness and for the inestimable gift we have been given in Christ is most sincerely expressed in amendment of life. If reconciliation is achieved, those who have been listening to God and each other must respond with obedience, resolving not to repeat the offenses and mistakes of the past. Those reconciled must also celebrate the gift of their unity and love. Joyful, heartfelt worship is the appropriate response to gift of reconciliation in Christ. Beginning with the admonition of Scripture, in which Jesus teaches us to go to sisters and brothers seeking to understand any disagreement, a time of prayer and conversation will be focused on understanding the nature and causes of experienced alienation and conflict and on identifying steps to be taken toward reconciliation.

During the listening process it will be important to:

- Begin by building a wide consensus about group process
- Be spiritual in our work, fair in our process, and open to any outcome
- Be explicit in our communications with and expectations of each other
- Recognize that discernment takes time and the fewer time restrictions we put on the process the better.

For the Pastoral Team and the leadership of the congregation, working in good faith and in an atmosphere of trust and love will mean

- Being open, honest and respectful in all their dealings with each other;
- Providing all requested information and documents to each other on a timely basis;
- Committing to protect the rights of the officers and members, if any, of the church who desire that the congregation remain loyal to the Presbytery and PC(USA), or who desire to remain congregants of another PC(USA) church;
- Ensuring that the congregation and Presbytery refrain from any unauthorized, unilateral changes in the way their assets are held or managed and do not initiate legal proceedings against the other party;

- Making the effort to reach a mutually agreeable resolution which provides clarification or mediation of the church's connectional relationship to the Presbytery within the limits of the *Book of Order* and other binding requirements existent throughout the PC(USA) and the Presbytery.

Periodic reports will be made to the PMT and the congregation as to the progress of these efforts. If at any time during the listening phase the above expectations of good faith are not being met a report shall immediately be made to the congregation and the Pastoral Ministry Team by the listening team in place. The PMT may then initiate appropriate measures in the manner and with the authorities described in the *Book of Order* (G-3.0109b).

In its dialogue with the church, the Pastoral Team may share matters for consideration with respect to implications for a church considering leaving the PC(USA) and for the status of the Presbyterian minister of such a church.

When the Pastoral Team determines that further progress can be made toward reconciliation through further dialogue, the Pastoral Team will report to PMT and recommend continued discussion, prayerfully coming to an acceptable resolution. The Pastoral Team will submit a written report summarizing the work that was accomplished. In addition, the PMT, or its designated representatives, will meet with representatives of the congregation and the Pastoral Team to hear their conclusions. The PMT will report to and make recommendations to the Presbytery concerning this process.

Phase Two: A Time of Resolution

Following a time of listening, there may be situations where sessions and congregations do accurately understand the policies and stances of the Presbytery and the PC(USA) and simply disagree with them. If concerns continue to exist after the time of listening has been completed, a **Resolution Team** will be appointed by the Pastoral Ministry Team. The decision to appoint this team will be communicated by PMT to the congregation immediately by letter to every member and to the Presbytery.

The purpose of the Resolution Team will be to engage the congregation and its leaders in a prayerful discernment process seeking a mutual understanding of what God may will for the relationship between the congregation and the Presbytery and the PC(USA). It is the intent of this process that all parties will seek an amicable and equitable agreement about how the congregation may either remain in the Presbytery and the PC(USA) or be dismissed.

The Resolution Team shall consist of 3-7 members, balanced as evenly as may be practicable, between Ministers of the Word and Sacrament and elders/deacons, and may include individuals with special skills, training or experience in mediation and negotiation. It shall be representative of various theological perspectives of the Presbytery to the extent possible. Members of the Listening Team that has been working with a particular congregation may be appointed to the Resolution Team.

With the congregation and its leaders, the Resolution Team will:

- study and assess the situation in the congregation;
- engage in dialogue;
- clarify issues of concern of both the congregation and the Presbytery, including the call of God to church unity, the value of being a PC(USA) congregation, constitutional processes, the exercise of mutual discernment discipline, the guidance of Holy Scripture and the Holy Spirit; and
- work in good faith toward a mutually agreeable resolution. As a part of this study and assessment it will be critical to hear from a variety of voices from within the Presbytery, including those who are concerned about the impact on the Presbytery's mission, those who are concerned about the "trust clause" of our

constitution (G-4.0203), those who are concerned about breaking the body of Christ and its impact on the whole church, and those concerned about our witness to the gospel through our life together.

For the Resolution Team and the leadership of the congregation, working in good faith in an atmosphere of trust and love will mean:

- Being open, honest and respectful in all their dealings with each other;
- Providing all requested information and documents to each other on a timely basis;
- Committing to protect the rights of the officers and members, if any, of the church who desire that the congregation remain loyal to the Presbytery and PC(USA), or who desire to remain congregants of another PC(USA) church;
- Ensuring that the congregation and Presbytery refrain from any unauthorized, unilateral changes in the way their assets are held or managed and do not initiate legal proceedings against the other party;
- Making the effort to reach a mutually agreeable resolution which provides clarification or mediation of the church's connectional relationship to the Presbytery within the limits of the *Book of Order* and other binding requirements existent throughout the PC(USA) and the Presbytery.

Periodic reports will be made to the PMT and the congregation as to the progress of these efforts. If at any time during the resolution phase the above expectations of good faith are not being met a report shall immediately be made to the congregation and the Pastoral Ministry Team by the Resolution Team in place. The PMT may then initiate appropriate measures in the manner and with the authorities described in the *Book of Order* (G-3.0109b).

A mutually agreeable resolution may result in a recommendation to the Presbytery that particular changes be made in the life of the Presbytery, in its organizational structure, and/or in the conduct of its meetings which will address experiences of disaccord. A mutually agreeable resolution may also result in a recommendation to the congregation and session of changes that can be made to lessen the feelings of disaccord among the members.

The Presbytery of Yellowstone recognizes that the full hope of reconciliation may not be achieved for a variety of reasons and that a mutually agreeable resolution may result in a recommendation to the Presbytery that the congregation be divided, dissolved, or dismissed to another Reformed denomination following all constitutional requirements. Requests for dismissal to another church body must specify a denomination or governing body in the Reformed tradition. Becoming independent, congregational, or nondenominational are not options. The failure to achieve a full reconciliation is a cause for repentance and deep sadness. When reconciliation cannot be achieved, then our hope is to accomplish a gracious separation.

The Presbytery of Yellowstone will be faithful to the principles set down by the 218th General Assembly for the development of processes for exercising the presbytery's responsibility and power "to divide, dismiss, or dissolve churches in consultation with their members" (G-3.0301c). Those principles are as follows:

- **Consistency:** The local authority delegated to presbyteries is guided and shaped by our shared faith, service, and witness to Jesus Christ.
- **Pastoral Responsibility:** The requirement in G-3.0301c to consult with the members of a church seeking dismissal highlights the presbytery's pastoral responsibility, which must not be submerged beneath other responsibilities.
- **Accountability:** For a governing body, accountability rightly dictates fiduciary and connectional concerns, raising general issues of property (G-4.02) and specific issues of schism within a congregation (G-4.0207). But full accountability also requires preeminent concern with "caring for the flock."

- **Gracious Witness:** It is our belief that Scripture and the Holy Spirit require a gracious witness from us rather than a harsh legalism.
- **Openness and Transparency:** Early, open communication and transparency about principles and process of dismissal necessarily serve truth, order, and goodness, and work against seeking civil litigation as a solution.

The process of gracious separation will be guided by the following principles based on our polity:

1. The Presbytery is the governing body empowered by the Constitution “to divide, dismiss, or dissolve churches in consultation with their members” (*Book of Order*, G-3.0301c). In addressing such critical issues as dismissing or dissolving churches, it is wise to proceed deliberately and with due consideration for the opportunity for reconciliation.
2. The Presbytery (or its duly appointed representatives) has the responsibility to consult with the members of a church about dismissal (G-3.0301c).
3. The unity we have in Christ and the relational nature of our polity require dialogue between and among governing bodies, congregations, pastors, and members, and the nature of dialogue requires faithful participation by all concerned. This faithful dialogue must be based on trust and love (G-1.0102).
4. The mission of the Kingdom of God and not the maintenance of any particular institution is our highest calling.
5. The particular institution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) embodies important principles and structures which have furthered and continue to further the Kingdom of God and which should not be cast aside lightly.
6. The local congregation is the primary mission unit of the Presbytery, and issues of property and money are always secondary to people and mission.
7. All decisions regarding property and finance will not be abdicated to the local congregation.
8. Property is maintained and administered locally by the congregation on behalf of the denomination. (*Book of Order*, G-4.0203)
9. Accountability and connection shall be maintained by shared, representative leadership and oversight.
10. Regarding issues of conscience, all parties must be willing to confront difficult realities, confront perceived breaches of trust, and consider the ongoing health and viability of the others.
11. Property issues will be approached in such a way as not to constrain local congregations in their ability to do mission and ministry.
12. Property issues will be approached in such a way as not to constrain the Presbytery’s ability to do mission and ministry in any given locality under its jurisdiction.

The Resolution Team and representatives of the congregation seeking dismissal shall present to the Presbytery through the PMT a formal proposal to accomplish a gracious separation. This proposal shall:

- Specify how the separation will affect assets, liabilities, including debt liquidations, pension, corporate, and other interests of the parties (including any group within the congregation which wishes to remain within the Presbytery) as well as the processes and procedures for the church to join another Presbytery or Reformed denomination.

- Be approved by secret ballot at a duly called congregational meeting where representatives of the Presbytery were present and given permission to speak and at least 75% of the members on the active roll were present and casting ballots.
- Be reviewed and assessed by the Leadership Cabinet of the Presbytery.

If the Resolution Team determines that a congregation will not work in good faith according to these criteria or that a mutually agreeable resolution cannot be reached, it will recommend to Presbytery that an Administrative Commission be formed (Book of Order: G-3.0108b, G-3.0303, and others).

The Resolution Team shall make a full report to the Pastoral Ministry Team, and its recommendations shall require action by the Presbytery. Although discernment through the time of listening takes un-pressured time, the Resolution Team will attempt to complete its work within 60 days and submit a final report to PMT within 30 days of that completion.

A Final Word (from Philippians 2:1-11)

It is our 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 interests but to the interests of others. Above all else, we will seek to have within us the mind of Christ who came as servant to all.

i This document is closely based upon the process developed by the Presbytery of Albany. The contributions of these additional presbyteries are also acknowledged:

The Presbytery of Southern New England

The Presbytery of the Cascades

The Presbytery of Beaver-Butler

The Presbytery of New Covenant

The Presbytery of North Puget Sound

ii “Seeking to be Faithful Together: Guidelines for Presbyterians During Times of Disagreement” is an additional resource for this discernment process.

iii Adapted from “DISCERNMENT: A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT Flowing with the Current of the Spirit in Church Meetings” by Marlene Kropf, Congregational and Ministerial Leadership Mennonite Church USA