



July 1, 2014

Dear Sisters and Brothers of the Presbytery of Florida,

We — and perhaps you — have learned that the transitional presbytery administrator of Tropical Florida Presbytery emailed a letter to PCUSA presbytery executives and middle governing body officials dated June 12, 2014, a document that we believe is intended as a call to punitive action against fellow Christians who rightfully exercise freedom of conscience. The letter is attached to this email. If you haven't read it already, we encourage you to do so.

Without foundation or factual evidence, the email attacks the legitimacy of ECO, assails the character of its leadership, and questions the ethical conduct of pastors formerly of Tropical Florida Presbytery. The email also implies that TFP may challenge the legitimacy of two current ECO pastoral relationships in the Presbytery of Florida, relationships that are viewed by TFP as violations of the "reversionary clause" of the churches' terms of dismissal from PCUSA to ECO.

We reject the history of events and the characterization of ECO leaders and members described in the email. ECO Synod and Presbytery of Florida leaders have reviewed the TFP administrator's assertions and are prepared to document the legitimacy of the actions taken by the COM of the (former) Presbytery of the East. We believe these matters must be addressed as violations of both denominational and interdenominational relations.

We are certain that this story will continue to unfold, and we will share it with you as events develop. For now, we ask your prayers and support for the Presbytery of Florida as we seek to advance our presbytery and denomination and our shared life and ministry together, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

With gratitude for being in ministry with you,

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June 12, 2014

To: Mid Council Leaders and Stated Clerks

From: Amalie Ash, Transitional Presbyter - Tropical Florida Presbytery

This letter is to encourage you and your presbytery to reconsider church dismissals. The Presbytery of Tropical Florida is encouraging you to consider the long range implications of this current trend; the impact on the dismissed congregations, the challenge to replace worshiping centers and the growth of a historic and relevant denomination.

In 2011, our leadership in Louisville was aware that the PCUSA would lose a percentage of churches. The Stated Clerk speaking at the San Diego Financial meeting estimated 10% to 13% would leave. I do not believe the leadership envisioned the largest, wealthiest and historic churches to be fodder for a new domination.

In 2012, Tropical Florida experienced the dismissal of ten churches, nine to the newly formed ECO. We have had a heightened awareness of the dismissal process unfolding around the country. When you observe it in-total and merely count churches, the numbers reflect low impact on the denomination. However, when you consider the membership, the property values, the per capita, mission giving, support for programs and missionaries, the careers in Louisville, the channel for new ministers and support for seminaries you see that the loss is much larger than the double digit number of churches. The departing churches may have withheld per capita but they supported many aspects of the denomination.

Have you consider the challenge of planting a new church? Around the USA, local governments are denying permits for new churches; new church plants cannot rent a dilapidated 7-11 in South Florida. In some areas we are denied permits for religion/non-profits to gather. Recently, a mega church agreed to pay property tax in order to buy a new building. The property is our heritage. It is where generations had a vision for Presbyterians to have a presence. A place for those seeking a reform tradition could worship. Even if you do not have a mission for a property, it is a resource for the Presbytery.

Presbyteries are fighting this with no support from GA. Each Presbytery is individually trying to solve the problems of dismissal, property and maverick pastors; each one is reinventing the same wheel. Presbyteries feel they have to let their churches go. Presbyteries need to know that they can stop this attack on our denomination.

The ECO leadership hails from Tropical Florida. We have observed their strategy being implemented in your presbyteries. Our denomination is being dissected by their successful well-orchestrated strategy that aids a church pastor(s) and a few key elders to project an inaccurate picture of the PCUSA and its spiritual beliefs. Pastors encourage elders to take the lead. Elders are carefully schooled to focus on inaccuracies such as the PCUSA no longer believes Jesus Christ is the head of the church. They are cautious to avoid any reference to the changes in ordination, lest they offend their progressive members. To

the person in the pew, these claims are highly charged; they trust their leaders and pastors are telling the truth. Thus the trusting congregation is easily swayed.

Tropical Florida was gracious. We believed that our congregations had discerned their beliefs and that we needed to provide a gracious exit for them. It was after, that we realized the pastors were in collusion, that churches were using the same “play book”, using the same sound bites, and had a strategy to leave in mass with a voting bloc. Recently we have learned that cradle Presbyterians regret they are no longer in the PCUSA; that they feel duped. The ECO strategy to take our churches understands that we will be nice, polite, avoid legal challenges and let the churches go.

ECO is an under-resourced collection of now independent churches. ECO is built on the PCUSA Book of confessions, PCUSA 2009 Book of Order, our church properties and our unknowing members.

- In Miami, a small (under 100 members) church went to ECO in 2012. Their pastor, upon learning he could not stay in the Board of Pensions and could not have his PIF in the PCUSA, changed his mind and stayed. (Now severing in UCC). ECO promised they had many pastors to fill the pulpit. After two years, the church’s pulpit was still empty. Finally, a PCA Church plant, supported by NYC Redeemer, negotiated a plan for this Miami church. Today the church is a PCA plant that now has an affiliate relationship with ECO. ECO told the church that if three ECO members were on their steering committee they would be considered ECO. Thereby skirting our GSA Reversionary Clause.
- Another dismissed church where the pastor renounced jurisdiction and the congregation was wounded; ECO placed an Evangelical Free Baptist pastor to serve as the interim.
- It is reported that a few pastors have been fired after their church was dismissed. This due to the unrealized promise of greener pastures after leaving the PCUSA.

With no trust clause, churches dismissed to ECO can change to independent or become part of another denomination. When we dismiss, we give the title to the church, ECO has no hold on a church remaining a reform tradition. The founders of our churches did not intend for this to happen.

Again, please know, there are tactics and strategy to recruit our biggest and wealthiest congregations and to build their numbers from our smaller churches; and their strategy is ethically questionable. ECO is being built off the work and contributions of Presbyterians who envisioned a PCUSA presence in their communities. ECO is turning congregations from the PCUSA with false statements and convincing them that they are a better way, a more holy way. This is not a new denomination being built on truth, but being assembled using our properties, our confessions, our processes but calling themselves a better way.

Leaders in the Presbytery of Tropical Florida believe that this train can be slowed down. We have learned that we do not have to let a church go, yes, the congregation can go, but they do not “deserve” their property. We now believe that the property is for the mission of this Presbytery and the PCUSA.....not for ECO...not for a pastor who has lead his congregation to believe that “we have lost our way” and no longer believe that Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church, etc.

This may sound hard, ungracious, and lacking compassion I believe we need to take a stand. A unified stand to save our denomination, a denomination that does make a difference in this world.

- We encourage you to reach out to other EPs that have been through this process.
- EPs that have lost churches help your neighboring presbyteries; share your experiences. How to negotiate property settlements, encourage them to have the courage and tenacity to stop (or discourage) churches from leaving. Let presbytery leadership know it takes resolve, time, and grit to stand down a group of angry elders, but they will be speaking for those that have been silenced. Churches can rebuild with the faith of a few; presbyteries have seen success in their divided congregations.
- Presbytery leaders meet with churches as soon as there is a whisper of a church leaving, to get to the churches that have been disconnected from the presbytery, to have COM checking on maverick pastors.
- Take action before dismissal is requested.
- Presbyteries it is ok to refuse to dismiss property; to remove pastors for breaking their vows of peace, unity and purity.

The Presbytery of Tropical Florida's leadership is available to support any presbytery seeking support or encouragement, please feel free to contact us.

In closing, we have the tools (Administrative Commissions, Book of Order, Trust Clause, the mission of the Presbytery, 1001 Worshiping Communities vision, etc.) to justify our reasons for the heritage of the PCUSA to remain as previous members, elders, and pastors had envisioned. It is worth the fight.

Stay Connected!

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