

**Pittsburgh Presbytery's**  
**Policy and Procedures for All Congregations**  
**Requesting a Gracious Separation**

As Christians, as the Church, we embody Christ in the here and now. We celebrate Christ's resurrection. We rejoice in the living, Triune God. Our hands, our hearts, our minds, and our spirits become the vessels, the instruments, which God calls and uses to share God's blessings and love with each other and the whole of creation.

*"... [T]he members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member that there may be no dissension with the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."*  
(1 Cor. 12:22-27)

*"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."*  
(1 Cor. 12:4-7)

However, when disagreement, sometimes vehement, pulls at the community, God is still with us. As God's children, we are gathered up and asked to extend forgiveness and strive for reconciliation. The gift of grace, which we have been so generously and freely given, is to be shared with one another. The other cheek is to be turned. The merciful and the peacemakers will be and are blessed.

We, individually and corporately, stand in the need of grace. Differences which are untended can become chasms that divide us. As Presbyterians, we have struggled for decades over certain theological and Biblical teachings, and we realize that persons of strong faith and understanding can differ in their understandings of Scripture and in ministry practice. These differences can divide us. We hope that what we share in common – namely, faith in the living God, Father, Son and Spirit, a deep and rich shared history, and a dedication to the great ends of the church – will sustain us in communion with one another. We have much to learn from one another. The Spirit is always at work within us, calling us to listen in all humility to one another. We fervently pray to sustain the connectional nature of the faith community called the Presbyterian Church (USA). *"With God, all things are possible."* (Matthew 19:26)

If a congregation of the Presbyterian Church (USA) desires to leave the denomination, God first of all weeps for and with us as the body of Christ. The body's gifts are separated from each other; both the congregation and the denomination suffer the loss. To reconcile and to heal is our deepest hope and prayer.

Together, we are the body of Christ; we are God's Church; we are the instruments of the Holy Spirit. As a Presbytery, we pray for unity, but commit ourselves to working through any separation in the name of the God who so graciously loves us, and as a denomination, as churches and as individuals, gives us the gift of life.

Therefore, Pittsburgh Presbytery sets forth the following process to guide us into graceful consideration of the best way to resolve our differences.

1. Congregations seeking dismissal from Pittsburgh Presbytery must become part of another Reformed body. For purposes of this policy a Reformed body is any denomination or other association recognized by the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). Dismissal of teaching elders is a separate matter to be individually pursued by each pastor wishing to be dismissed.
2. The date that Pittsburgh Presbytery confirms receipt of written notice from a congregation's Session that the congregation wishes to enter a discernment process with Presbytery that could result in dismissal marks the beginning of a not-less-than 9 and not more than 18 month discernment time during which presbytery representatives shall be part of the discernment process. **Both parties may agree to continue the discernment process for a specific period of time.**
3. During any discussions regarding a congregation's request to be dismissed by the Pittsburgh Presbytery from the Presbyterian Church (USA), the respective parties agree that:
  - a. All parties choose to stay out of the civil courts;
  - b. No acts or impressions of 'intimidation' will be tolerated;
  - c. Open discussion with the congregation by the Presbytery will be extended and permitted before/leading up to any congregational vote on a dismissal request;
  - d. The congregation will disclose its membership addresses to the Presbytery at least 60 days before any congregational vote on requesting dismissal, so that the Presbytery may contact the members directly [in specific circumstances in which a congregational member would object to an address being disclosed, the session would mail the Presbytery's sealed communication to that member];
  - e. The session will neither specially purge the rolls, nor specially add to the rolls, leading up to a congregational vote (normal roll maintenance continues);
  - f. **An Administrative Commission will be formed pursuant to Book of Order G-3.0109 and will engage in discussions and negotiations as a representative of Pittsburgh Presbytery with the congregation.**

4. After the discernment period there is to be a first Congregational Meeting to determine if the congregation wishes to be dismissed. The vote for proceeding must be at least a simple majority of the total membership. A member's presence may be either physical (strongly preferred) or electronically achieved so long as the member is able to both hear and speak as part of the meeting. Voting for those not physically present will be by roll call with voting procedures determined to accomplish the same effect as a secret ballot. This first vote is considered preliminary and advisory only, authorizing proceeding to the development of a dismissal agreement that must be confirmed by a second congregational vote.
5. A season of negotiations to develop a dismissal agreement will then be entered into on a congregation-by-congregation basis, i.e., any dismissal is on a case-by-case analysis. In part this discernment will include analysis of any financial settlement involved in a dismissal. Any financial settlement will reflect a gracious witness policy that enables the congregation to carry on its desired mission post-dismissal with its property intact subject to, **but not limited to**, the following considerations:
  - a. Ability of the PC(USA) to continue its mission in the church's nearby vicinity, including providing ongoing local spiritual care for members wishing to remain affiliated with the PC(USA);
  - b. Directives that endowments/trusts/memorials of the congregation stay within the PC(USA);
  - c. Financial wherewithal of the congregation seeking dismissal to carry on its desired mission post-dismissal;
  - d. Agreed removal of PC(USA) memorial plaques and signage;
  - e. Size of membership;
  - f. Financial statements of the congregation for a past number of years;
  - g. History of per capita payments by the congregation;
  - h. Property valuations of physical plant and real estate.
6. If, after prayerful discernment and discussion, an agreement on a financial settlement cannot be reached, the financial portion of the dismissal agreement will be decided by binding arbitration. Presbytery and the church seeking dismissal shall each choose an arbitrator and these arbitrators shall choose a neutral chairperson. These arbitrators will then direct the proceedings in order to allow Presbytery and the church seeking dismissal to present their respective positions orally and in writing with a decision to be made following the submissions forthwith. Nothing in this policy prevents the arbitrators from assisting the parties in negotiating an agreement for a financial settlement. Expenses for any arbitration process will be shared equally between the Presbytery and the church seeking dismissal.

7. The financial settlement plan will ensure that a dismissal action will neither create nor extend to Pittsburgh Presbytery any new encumbrance. Further, no dismissal action will leave Pittsburgh Presbytery holding any liability or mortgage related to a dismissed property.
8. A second Congregational Meeting will then be convened to specifically vote to be dismissed with an actual dismissal agreement in hand. The vote affirming the dismissal agreement must be at least a simple majority of the total membership. A member's presence may be either physical (strongly preferred) or electronically achieved so long as the member is able to both hear and speak as part of the meeting. Voting for those not physically present will be by roll call with voting procedures determined to accomplish the same effect as a secret ballot.
9. Following congregational approval, a vote of the Presbytery for dismissal will be made with approval by a simple majority vote. Following Presbytery approval, payment in full of any financial settlement and any agreed upon removal of memorial plaques and signage shall be completed within 90 days of approval for dismissal by the Presbytery. Within this same period all historic original congregational minutes, rolls and registers will be turned over to the Presbytery with the congregation retaining a copy at its own expense. Similarly, the Presbytery at any dismissal would appropriately and legally relinquish all legal rights to the property within this same period.

\* \* \*

**A Gracious Separation Policy Task Force** was established in December 2011 by the Executive Council in response to a November 22, 2011, proposed "Policy and Procedure for the Dismissal of Churches in Pittsburgh Presbytery," from the sessions of Bellefield, Lebanon, Mt. Lebanon, and Round Hill churches for a Gracious Separation Policy for the Pittsburgh Presbytery. The Task Force was specifically directed to prepare a process for engaging congregations expressing a desire to explore dismissal from Pittsburgh Presbytery. This process was to be presented to the Executive Council no later than at its May 2012 meeting.

The Task Force appointed by the Executive Council included:

- Dan Beckstrom, Chair, Finance Committee
- David Lavender, Chair, Ecclesiastical Committee
- Jay Lewis, Stated Clerk (Replaced by Jeff Tindall on May 3, 2012)
- Dan Merry, Chair, Executive Committee
- Margaret Miller, Chair, Property Committee
- Doug Portz, Associate Pastor to Presbytery
- Sheldon Sorge, Pastor to Presbytery
- David Thornton, Co-Chair, Personnel Committee
- Deb Warren, Committee on Ministry
- Steve Wilson, Co-Chair, Personnel Committee

Representatives from the four submitting churches participating in a consulting role included:

- Pamela Werner, Elder, Round Hill
- Charles Griffin, Elder, Mount Lebanon
- Greg Sabolsky, Elder, Lebanon
- Larry Williams, Clerk of Session, Bellefield

The Task Force was encouraged in all deliberations about any possible congregational departures to, 1) fulfill Scripture's exhortation in "making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3); and 2) remain cognizant that in a matter as significant as breaking historic bonds between the presbytery and one of its congregations, a deliberate, transparent, and healthy process will benefit both the congregation and the presbytery.

The Task Force, understanding the potential challenges of the subject, sought to identify those areas in which agreement could quickly be established. At its first meeting in February 2012, the Task Force agreed by consensus on the following points:

- All parties choose to stay out of the civil courts;
- The congregation will disclose its membership addresses to the Presbytery at least 60 days before any congregational vote on requesting dismissal, so that the Presbytery may contact the members directly [in specific circumstances in which a congregational member would object to an address being disclosed, the session would mail the Presbytery's sealed communications to that member];
- The session will neither specially purge the rolls, nor specially add to the rolls, during the agreed upon discernment leading up to a congregational vote (normal maintenance accepted);
- No acts or impression of 'intimidation' by either the church or presbytery will be tolerated (understanding that strongly stating one's opinion or position is advocacy, not intimidation);
- A congregation may be dismissed only to a Reformed denomination; "Reformed" will be defined as being recognized by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches;
- Open discussion with the congregation by the Presbytery will be extended and permitted before/leading up to any congregational vote on a dismissal request;
- Dismissal of teaching elders is a separate matter to be individually pursued by each pastor who wishes to be dismissed, and as such will not be included as part of the Gracious Dismissal Policy;
- Settlements would only be considered official if mutually agreed upon by both the church and Presbytery;

- Presbytery would not be left holding any loans or mortgages on any dismissed property, and any financial settlements would be expected to be paid in full at time of settlement.

After an approximately two month period of discussion and idea interchanges, the Task Force agreed by consensus on the following points:

- There is to be a minimum of 9 months and a maximum of 18 months discernment time, starting with the date a congregation's Session's written notice to the Presbytery that its congregation wishes to enter a discernment process with Presbytery that could result in dismissal is confirmed as received by the Presbytery office.
- All votes require a member's presence that may be either physical (strongly preferred) or electronically achieved so long as the member is able to both hear and speak as part of the meeting. The vote will require a simple majority of the total congregational membership for passage. Voting for those not physically present will be by roll call with voting procedures determined to accomplish the same effect as a secret ballot.
- Any financial settlement will be negotiated on a case-by-case basis. In the event the parties are unable to arrive at a mutually agreeable settlement, both parties agree to submit to binding arbitration.

The above settlement points were incorporated into a single Gracious Separation Policy, which was presented to the Executive Committee at its meeting on May 22, 2012. The Executive Committee received the report of the Task Force and commended its members. It then voted to have the report amended. The above report is the result of these changes.