

1 **A Process for Discerning God’s Will**
2 **In the Relationship Between**
3 **The Presbytery of Donegal and Its Member Congregations**
4 **When Member Churches Seek Dismissal from the**
5 **Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)**

6 **PREAMBLE**

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

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

17 The Presbytery of Donegal is committed to pursuing God’s mission with pastors, Sessions, and
18 congregations who are seeking or considering dismissal from the denomination. Whether God’s
19 mission takes the form of dismissal or mutually accepted recommitment to the presbytery-
20 congregational relationship, it is the will of this Presbytery to create a gracious context and
21 process in which the will of God is sought for the life, ministry, and calling of the particular
22 congregation. The Presbytery commits itself and invites all its congregations to pursue a broad
23 understanding of God’s mission with a graciousness befitting those who claim Jesus as Lord.

24 The history of the church, from the beginning, has been a history of controversy. Men and
25 women of good will and sincere faith sometimes disagree. Paul and Barnabas had to separate
26 for a season in order to continue their respective ministries (*Acts 15:39*). The church of Jesus
27 Christ is divided into three great traditions: Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox. The Protestant
28 tradition is again divided into Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed (Presbyterian) and Anabaptist
29 communions. In recent generations, we have also witnessed the reuniting of bodies that were
30 once separated. God, in his wisdom, has permitted the church to grow through and in spite of
31 these actions.

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

- 33 a. Is God leading this particular congregation to seek dismissal from the
34 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) or toward restoration of fellowship with the
35 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)? And,
36 b. If God is leading this congregation to seek dismissal from the Presbyterian
37 Church (U.S.A.), how can that be accomplished in a way that honors Jesus
38 Christ and strengthens both the congregation and the Presbytery?

- 1 c. If God is leading this congregation toward restoration of fellowship with the
2 Presbyterian Church (USA), how can that be accomplished in a way that
3 honors Jesus Christ and strengthens both the congregation and the
4 Presbytery?

5 The Presbytery asks that any Session seeking or considering dismissal from the denomination
6 will covenant with the Presbytery to enter into a defined process of mutual discernment to
7 determine God's purpose. To seek God's will requires significant time and energy. We believe
8 that a matter of this magnitude deserves focused attention and prayer by the Presbytery and
9 local congregation whatever the specific outcome may be. This process should take no less
10 than four months and may take more than one year.

11 The Presbytery is committed to this process and covenants to avoid litigation wherever and
12 whenever possible. In fulfillment of Resolution 04-28 adopted by the 218th General Assembly,
13 we recognize that the exercise of the process to "divide, dismiss, or dissolve churches in
14 consultation with their members" (*Book of Order*, G-3.0301a.), if accomplished by litigation, "is
15 deadly to the cause of Christ ... and our witness to Christ in the world around us." Therefore, we
16 will carefully follow the principles of consistency, pastoral responsibility, accountability, gracious
17 witness, openness, and transparency.

18 Presbytery and the Session will work together to create a media plan, designating who will
19 provide information to the media from the Presbytery and the Session, and committing to work
20 in concert on such contacts in order to maintain a witness to Christ in the world. It is
21 recommended that neither party speak to the media until the process is completed and the
22 outcome is agreed. In a similar manner, all documents that may become part of the public
23 domain shall be developed together by the Discernment Team.

24 The Trust Clause (G-4.02) is meant to reflect the church's organic unity as it fulfills "The Great
25 Ends of the Church", strengthening its ability to guide its member churches into their witness to
26 the broader community. Because the trust clause is meant as a means of witness to our unity in
27 the covenant of common mission, it is incumbent upon the Presbytery to act in a pastoral
28 manner rather than in an adversarial manner to its member churches in regard to its provisions.

29

PROCEDURE

30 A Session wishing to initiate this procedure shall put the matter to a vote at a special Session
31 meeting called for this purpose. If the majority of the Session votes to initiate the discernment
32 procedure, the Clerk of Session shall contact the Presbytery office and inform the Stated Clerk
33 of this desire. Both parties may then begin the work of recruiting member representatives for a
34 Discernment Team.

35 The Discernment Team shall consist of four representatives from the church and four
36 representatives from the Presbytery. The Session of the congregation shall choose the
37 representatives from the church, reporting to the Presbytery Council; the Presbytery Council
38 shall then choose representatives from the Presbytery insuring parity between Teaching Elder
39 and Ruling Elder representatives. The Discernment Team shall meet together at least four
40 times.

1 The Presbytery Council shall appoint the moderator, whose purpose is to facilitate the
2 conversation so that each team member has an equal chance to participate. The moderator
3 shall have an equal voice and vote with the other members of the Discernment Team. The
4 Executive Presbyter, the Moderator of Presbytery, and the Stated Clerk of the Presbytery shall
5 be ex officio members of the Discernment Team and shall attend meetings as available. The
6 Moderator of the Discernment Team shall make sure that the Discernment Team receives
7 appropriate orientation to include reviewing the process, the history of the presbytery in
8 relationship to the congregation, and the larger issues surrounding this particular process.

9 The Discernment Team will meet at least four times within a six-month period. Team members
10 should prepare for two hours at each meeting. Members of the congregation who are not
11 serving on the Discernment Team are strongly encouraged to attend team meetings in order to
12 listen to the content of the discussion. In each meeting, time shall be provided for input from the
13 congregational members present. This feedback will help determine the content of the third and
14 any subsequent meetings.

15 First Meeting

16 During the first meeting, Discernment Team members will exchange extended
17 introductions, sharing a portion of their faith stories and their understanding of the
18 spiritual and theological issues at stake in the conflict between the church and
19 the Denomination/Presbytery. The first meeting will primarily be a listening
20 session.

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

28 29 Second Meeting

30 The second meeting will consist of a discussion of the relationship between the
31 congregation and the presbytery, including a conversation of shared events
32 between the congregation and presbytery and a sharing of how those events
33 have been interpreted by various parties. It will also be appropriate during this
34 meeting for members of the Presbytery team to offer to those present reasons for
35 remaining in the current covenant relationship between Donegal Presbytery and
36 the congregation.

37
38 *“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not*
39 *seen...Yet these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive*
40 *what was promised, since God has provided something better.... (Hebrews 11: 1,*
41 *39) We are called by Scripture to view our history through the lens of faith,*
42 *seeking to discern God’s redemptive work in our own history in Jesus Christ. In*
43 *this process, we lay before God the history of the congregation and the*
44 *presbytery, asking God to guide, reveal, redeem, lead, and forgive.*

1 Third Meeting

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

9 *Estrangement and alienation between Christians are a consequence of sin. We*
10 *cannot say to one another "I do not belong to the body" or "I have no need of*
11 *you" (1 Corinthians 12:14, 21). All of us must be willing to hear from each other*
12 *the ways that we have hurt, excluded, and offended. Then we must admit our sin*
13 *and ask God for the grace of repentance and the mercy of forgiveness.*

14 Fourth and Subsequent Meetings

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

19 It is the Presbytery's hope that through this process we will remember the
20 consolation we have from love, the sharing in the Spirit we have enjoyed, and the
21 compassion and sympathy we have for one another. Further, we will strive to do
22 nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better
23 than ourselves. We will not look to our own interests but to the interests of others.
24 *Above all else, we will seek to have within us the mind of Christ who came as*
25 *servant to all. (Philippians 2:1-11)*

26 After completing the required sessions, the Discernment Team shall make a report and
27 recommendation to the congregation and to the Presbytery regarding the future of the
28 relationship between the Presbytery and the congregation. If the Discernment Team perceives
29 that the congregation and the Presbytery are still called by God to work together in covenant
30 relationship and recommends restoration of fellowship between the congregation and the
31 Presbytery, it is the Presbytery's hope that the church will be led by this recommendation and
32 that both parties will work together to craft a process to heal the broken relationship (see
33 Appendix B). If, after completing this process, the Discernment Team believes that the wisest
34 course is for the congregation and Presbytery to no longer work together in covenant
35 relationship and recommends dismissal to another Reformed body, it shall report this to the
36 Presbytery Council which may then decide to ratify, on behalf of Presbytery, a session's
37 decision to call a congregational meeting to vote on whether the congregation wishes to seek
38 dismissal from the denomination as described in Appendix A. In the event that the Discernment
39 Team cannot arrive at a majority decision, then the Team shall submit reports from both
40 perspectives to the Presbytery.

41 These policies and procedures shall take effect immediately upon approval by the Presbytery.

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APPENDIX A

Process of Seeking Dismissal to another Reformed Body

Upon completion of the discernment process described in above, a Session and congregation desiring to enter into the process of dismissal shall follow this procedure:

1. The Session shall call for a meeting of the congregation. Advance notice for the meeting shall be by written letter to each member on the active roll of the congregation, as well as through Sunday worship announcements. The letter shall be mailed at least thirty days in advance of the meeting date, and public worship announcements shall be made at all worship services between the date of the call and the actual congregational meeting. Representatives of the Presbytery (members of the Discernment Team, Presbytery Council, the Executive Presbyter, and Stated Clerk) shall also be invited to the meeting, with the right to address the body gathered.
2. A quorum for this congregational meeting shall be twenty-five percent of the active membership, the attendees being recorded by name.
3. The Session shall make a written presentation to the congregation pertaining to the intention of the session and the vote of the Presbytery. The Presbytery shall also make a written presentation. These documents shall be reviewed by the Discernment Team. All members present, as well as the representatives of Presbytery, shall have the right to speak. When the discussion is concluded, the vote shall be taken, by written ballot of the active members of the congregation present. At least three-quarters of those present and voting must vote in favor of requesting dismissal to another Reformed body in order for the proposal to be passed.
4. If a motion requesting dismissal is passed with at least the requisite majority, then the Presbytery Council shall begin a process of negotiation with the Session in regard to the terms of dismissal. This process should be concluded within a reasonable time, but at most within six months from the date of the congregational meeting per item 3 above. The terms of dismissal agreed upon in this negotiation process must then be returned to the congregation for a subsequent congregational meeting, called and announced in the same manner as required for the prior meeting, and with at least ten percent of the congregation present of the active congregation present, accepted by a simple majority of those present and voting, in order to be the effective decision of the congregation.

****NOTE:** In the event that the vote for the terms of dismissal, as worked out by the Presbytery and the congregation, does not attain the required level of affirmative votes, then two choices remain open to the congregation at this time.

- a. It may, through its authorized representatives continue to negotiate with the Presbytery to seek different terms for dismissal, and then offer these to the congregation for another vote (under the same terms as the previous meeting and voting requirements); or

- 1 b. It may choose not to pursue dismissal further at this time, in which case it must, by
2 appropriate congregational meeting and vote (under the same rules outlined above
3 for congregational meetings), rescind its earlier action requesting dismissal. Should
4 this all take place, Presbytery shall continue to work with the congregation with the
5 goal of reducing dissatisfaction and enhancing the relationship between the
6 Presbytery and the congregation.
- 7 5. Desiring not to impede the ministry of either the departing congregation or the Presbytery,
8 the departing congregation shall remit to the Presbytery a sum equal to three times the
9 annual amount of the Presbytery portion of per capita at the time the initial congregational
10 meeting is held. The use of this money shall be determined by the Presbytery Council.
- 11 6. A congregation that is approved for dismissal may take its name with it.
- 12 7. In the event that any congregation is approved for dismissal under the terms of this policy,
13 the Presbytery and the congregation shall take all steps possible in order to provide for the
14 pastoral care and congregational life of those members who do not wish to depart the
15 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Their protection and nurture shall be a matter of paramount
16 concern to both the departing congregation and to the Presbytery.
- 17 8. In the event that any congregation's request for dismissal is approved under the terms of
18 this policy, the Presbytery shall, in conjunction with the congregation, hold a final worship
19 service of commissioning, to celebrate our common life in Jesus Christ and to pray for the
20 effectiveness and well-being of both the congregation and the Presbytery. Those departing
21 the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will be commissioned by the Presbytery to further their
22 work for the kingdom as they go forward in ministry. The service will be jointly planned by
23 members of the Presbytery Council and the Session, and all congregations of the
24 Presbytery of Donegal shall be invited.
- 25 9. A congregation being dismissed shall pay off any loans outstanding to any entity of the
26 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Any bequests or endowments naming the Presbytery or the
27 P.C. (U.S.A.) as the beneficiary shall be transferred to the Presbytery of Donegal. Matters of
28 loans of the congregation held by non-Presbyterian entities are the responsibility of the
29 congregation, and the Presbytery shall be legally relieved of any responsibility related to
30 such loans.
- 31 10. A congregation being dismissed shall be required to close out its financial and membership
32 books as of the official date of dismissal. Such records shall be submitted to the
33 Presbyterian Historical Society to be copied at the cost of the departing congregation (G-
34 3.0107). The original documents shall be returned to the congregation when such copies
35 have been completed.
- 36 11. A congregation being dismissed shall be required to work with the Presbyterian Church
37 (U.S.A.) Board of Pensions to facilitate a clean transition at the time of dismissal.
- 38 12. A congregation being dismissed shall work closely and diligently with the Presbytery to
39 assist in the transfer of membership of members who do not desire to remain with the
40 disaffiliating congregation.

1 13. There are some practical considerations to be addressed should a congregation be
2 approved for dismissal. These are listed for information, but are not binding for the purposes
3 of this policy.

4 a. The status of the minister(s) currently called or employed by the congregation:
5 whether they shall remain with the congregation and transfer their ministerial status
6 to the new denomination, or whether they choose to remain within the PCUSA, and
7 may need to look forward to seeking a new call.

8 b. The status of any insurance policies held by the congregation with instrumentalities
9 of the PC (U.S.A.) may need to be changed.

10 c. The tax status of a congregation as a non-profit tax-exempt organization may need
11 to be re-established under the new denomination to which the congregation is being
12 dismissed.

13 d. The corporate status of the congregation may need to be revised.

14 14. If a congregation or its leadership preemptively files suit in a civil court against the
15 Presbytery, the Presbytery of Donegal will answer the suit. Likewise, if a congregation or its
16 leadership abandons these processes before completion, it is within the purview of the
17 Presbytery to establish an administrative commission to work toward resolution of these
18 matters with the congregation. All policy considerations listed in this document also apply to
19 an administrative commission.

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APPENDIX B

Guidelines for Restoration of Fellowship and Recommitment to Presbytery-Congregational Relationship

In hope that God leads those involved to seek a restored fellowship and a recommitment to the presbytery-congregational relationship, the following are presented as minimal guidelines for marking and sealing that recommitment:

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.
2. The Presbytery shall conduct a public service of worship and recommitment to shared fellowship and ministry with participation from Presbytery and congregation.
3. The testimony of members of the Discernment Team and congregation shall be shared at the congregational and presbytery level.
4. Any minority that leaves the congregation shall be blessed and commissioned in the hope of maintaining bonds of peace.

The members of the Task Force on Gracious Separation for the Presbytery of Donegal hereby express their appreciation to other presbyteries that have walked this path before us. Their hard work has provided the major building blocks on which we have crafted this process.