

The Presbytery of Middle Tennessee



Worship Planning Checklist

- Checklist items: Date, Time, Host, Theme, Preacher, Worship Leader(s), Ushers, Hymnal, Organist, Pianist, Musicians, Worship Committee Liaison, Bulletin Production, Designated Offering, Issue of the Day.

Gracious Separation Policy

Dr. Bill Bryant, chair of the Council’s Gracious Separation Work Group, introduced the members of the Work Group: Steve Douse (Moderator of Presbytery); Guy Griffith (Teaching Elder, Westminster Nashville); Harry S. Hassall (Teaching Elder, Honorably Retired); Melinda Sanders (Ruling Elder, Glen Leven Nashville). Dr. Bryant presented the rationale for the policy, and provided two editorial amendments. The Coordinating Council recommended adoption of the Gracious Separation Policy. There was discussion, and the following policy was approved as amended:

PRESBYTERY OF MIDDLE TENNESSEE
POLICY GOVERNING DISMISSAL OF CONGREGATIONS

“Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord.” Isaiah 1:18

- I. Principles and Overview
A. Presbytery’s Role
The Presbytery of Middle Tennessee has a pastoral responsibility for its congregations and their members that extends to those seeking to leave its fellowship. Our role is to be a shepherd, not an adversary. In the case of disaffected congregations, this means helping them discern where God is leading them to continue their ministry.
B. Reconciliation or Gracious Separation
Our first priority is reconciliation. By reasoning together we hope to overcome grievances and find creative solutions that will allow us to continue a ministry partnership. If that is not possible, our goal is to work collaboratively with the congregation toward a gracious separation. We do not seek to retain congregations or their property when the bonds of fellowship have been irretrievably broken.
C. Discernment and Dialogue
Before seeking separation, congregations will be asked to engage in a time of prayer, reflection, and spiritual discernment. They will also be asked to meet with teaching and ruling elders from other churches (an “Isaiah 1:18 Team”) who will provide information, answer questions, address concerns, and explore options for continuing to work together. These discussions should be structured in a way that insures all voices will be heard and the interests of all members of the congregation will be considered.
D. Resolution
If discernment and dialogue produce a consensus in favor of reconciliation, the parties can move on to repairing (and perhaps restructuring) their relationship. If not, the congregation must vote on whether to request dismissal. This

policy specifies procedural safeguards to insure the fairness of that process. This is particularly important when churches are not of one mind. Presbytery has a duty to protect the interests of all the church's members. Our objective is to find a solution that enables the majority but also protects the minority. To that end, this policy establishes different conditions for departure depending on the size of the majority wishing to leave.

E. Dismissal

If a congregation follows this process and votes to leave the PCUSA, presbytery will honor the will of the majority and dismiss the congregation subject to the terms and conditions set forth in this policy. Insofar as it depends on us, we will avoid litigation.

F. Relocation and Redevelopment

Presbytery will assist members of a departing congregation who wish to remain within the PCUSA to find new church homes or to form a new congregation.

G. Mutual Respect

The church witnesses to the world by its actions. That witness is diminished when we fail to treat each other with love and respect. It is the goal of this policy that no matter the outcome, we will have furthered our Christian witness to the world.

II. Initiating the Dismissal Process

A session may initiate the dismissal process by sending a letter to the stated clerk requesting appointment of an Isaiah 1:18 team. Alternatively, presbytery's coordinating committee, if it becomes aware of substantial sentiment favoring separation in a congregation, may start the process on its own initiative. The coordinating committee shall inform the committee on ministry of the formation of an Isaiah 1:18 Team.

If the committee on ministry becomes aware of discord within a congregation that includes issues of discontent with the denomination, it shall inform the coordinating committee. Working together, the coordinating committee and committee on ministry shall attempt to determine the primary source of discord. If the discontent is primarily related to the congregation's differences with the denomination, this policy applies and an Isaiah 1:18 team shall have primary responsibility for working with the congregation. The Isaiah 1:18 team shall keep the committee on ministry informed of its progress and may call on the committee on ministry for assistance in dealing with issues that would normally be that committee's responsibility. If the primary discord within the congregation is not related to the denomination, the committee on ministry will take the lead in attempting to resolve the situation.

III. The Isaiah 1:18 Team

A. Appointment and Composition

Once this policy has been invoked, the coordinating committee shall appoint an Isaiah 1:18 team to represent presbytery in dealing with the disaffected congregation. The team shall consist of seven teaching and ruling elders (at least three of each) from churches other than the one with which the team will be dealing. It is desirable but not essential that the team members be from different churches.

The coordinating committee shall select members who are best able to (1) assist the congregation in spiritual discernment, (2) respond effectively to the concerns and grievances of the congregation, and (3) oversee the procedures required for reconciliation or separation, giving due regard to the qualities of wisdom, loving kindness, compassion, proximity, availability, and diversity. The coordinating committee should consult with the committee on ministry and the congregational development committee with an eye toward including members who are well suited to address issues of conflict within the church and possible redevelopment of a remnant congregation. It is desirable but not essential that at least one member of the coordinating committee be part of each team.

Once the team has been named, the coordinating committee shall report the composition of the team to the next meeting of presbytery.

B. Responsibilities and Authority

The Isaiah 1:18 team shall be authorized to act for presbytery in performing the following duties and responsibilities:

(1) Guide the session and congregation in a time of prayer, reflection, and spiritual discernment about the direction of the particular church's ministry;

(2) Engage in dialogue with the session and congregation to learn the various perspectives within the congregation, to provide information, answer questions, and address concerns, and to explore options for continuing a ministry partnership with the congregation;

(3) Make agreements that will resolve differences with the congregation, so long as those agreements are consistent with the book of order and presbytery's mission handbook;

- (4) Recommend other agreements for approval by presbytery, if they will require changes in the mission handbook;
- (5) Oversee the implementation of all agreements with the session and congregation;
- (6) Advise the session on the requirements for a valid congregational vote on dismissal and represent presbytery at any congregational meeting called for that purpose;
- (7) Monitor actions taken by the session and the congregation in order to determine how well they have complied with this policy and whether the votes or other actions accurately reflect the will of the congregation;
- (8) Negotiate terms of dismissal with a departing congregation;
- (9) Assist members of a dividing congregation to negotiate the terms of their separation;
- (10) Recommend to presbytery the dismissal of a congregation, in accordance with this policy, if that is the congregation's decision;
- (11) Work with the congregational development committee in assisting members of a departing or dividing congregation who wish to remain in this denomination to find a new church home or to form a new church.

The Isaiah 1:18 team is authorized to take all actions that are necessary or advisable to enable the team to perform these functions. The team may conduct routine or urgent business electronically, at the discretion of the moderator. The team may authorize limited expenditure of funds in aid of its mission, but only after conferring with the chairman of the administration and finance committee or his or her designee to insure that sufficient funds are available to cover the contemplated expenditures. Any significant expenditure of unbudgeted funds requires presbytery's approval.

C. Moderator and Secretary

The coordinating committee shall designate a team member to serve as moderator. The team shall choose a secretary at its first meeting.

D. Training

As soon as practicable after being appointed the team shall meet with the stated clerk to review the terms of this policy and such portions of the book of order and mission handbook as are relevant to the team's work. The team's moderator shall also arrange for the team to be briefed on what is known of the circumstances that led to the team's appointment and to receive such other training or advice (for example, in spiritual discernment or conflict management) as seems appropriate in the circumstances.

IV. The Joint Working Group

A. Formation

The moderator of a newly constituted Isaiah 1:18 team will contact the moderator and clerk of session of the affected church, inform them of the team's appointment, and ask the session to select a delegation to represent the congregation. The delegation should be roughly equal in size to the Isaiah 1:18 team. The members should be broadly representative of sentiment within the congregation, including those who wish to leave, those who wish to stay, and those who are undecided. They should be members of the congregation who have the confidence of the session and the congregation, or at least of significant elements within those bodies, and can speak for them in either an informal or a formal sense. They should also be able to devote the time and energy needed to follow this process through to a resolution.

It is up to the session to decide just what standing or authority to grant this delegation, but at a minimum it must be empowered to serve as a conduit between the Isaiah 1:18 team and the session, and the session must be prepared to act promptly on its recommendations. The session shall appoint one of the members of the delegation to act as moderator, and that person shall be empowered to represent the delegation in dealing with the moderator of the Isaiah 1:18 team on matters of procedure.

B. Timetable

This policy requires the congregation to act deliberately and not in haste. The entire process, from spiritual discernment and dialogue through final resolution is likely to take at least six months. Although this represents a significant commitment of time and energy, a matter of this magnitude demands careful and prayerful consideration. Whatever decision results from this process is likely to better serve the church and its mission as a result.

The following subsections provide a chronology for the joint working group and for the overall process. It proceeds in stages and assumes one meeting of the joint working group for each stage. It may turn out that things do not proceed in this neat or linear a fashion and adjustments will have to be made. That is perfectly acceptable as long as the basic integrity of the process is maintained and the congregation is prepared to make a fully informed and well considered decision.

C. First Meeting

As soon as can be arranged, the Isaiah 1:18 team shall meet with the congregation's representatives at their church or at another mutually agreeable location. In order to promote a good working relationship, only members of the two groups (together referred to as the joint working group) should attend this meeting. Later meetings may be opened to other interested persons if the two moderators agree that public attendance would be desirable. The moderator of the Isaiah 1:18 team shall preside and serve as facilitator. The Isaiah 1:18 team's secretary shall take minutes and circulate them to all members of the joint working group. The moderators shall jointly set the agenda for the meeting, which should include: (1) introductions of the members, (2) a discussion aimed at identifying the issues causing discontent and the current state of mind of the congregation, (3) a spiritual discernment exercise, (4) a spiritual discernment plan for the session and congregation, and (5) a schedule for future meetings. All important decisions of the joint working group require the assent of a majority of the Isaiah 1:18 team and a majority of the congregational delegation.

In addition to personal background information, introductions should include a summary of each person's faith journey and involvement with the church. The moderator of the Isaiah 1:18 team is responsible for conducting (or assigning) the spiritual discernment exercise, which is intended to acquaint both groups with the type of prayerful study and discussion that the session and congregation will be expected to undertake. The moderator of the congregational delegation is responsible for leading the discussion of issues that are troubling the congregation. To the extent possible, it should be limited to identifying issues and clarifying positions rather than debating their merits. The moderator of the Isaiah 1:18 team should be prepared to offer an outline or curriculum for the congregation to follow in seeking the Spirit's guidance on the church's mission and ministry, not for immediate adoption but for explanation and transmission to the session.

At least three more meetings should be planned. How quickly they occur will depend not only on the availability of joint working group members but also the time needed for spiritual discernment and town hall meetings for the congregation. Subsequent meetings between the Isaiah 1:18 team and the congregational representatives should follow the same procedures as the first meeting.

D. Second Meeting

By the second meeting the congregational representatives should be prepared to agree on a spiritual discernment plan for the session and congregation, subject only to session approval if necessary. The primary topic at this meeting should be the sources of discontent in the congregation. The Isaiah 1:18 team should be prepared to address the issues identified at the first meeting. One objective is to clear up misconceptions and be sure that everyone is operating with the same understanding of the facts. A second objective is to see if the two groups can find common ground on potentially divisive issues of theology and polity. A third objective is to discuss how congregational concerns might be addressed, lessened, accommodated, or eliminated and to explore how the congregation might be able to continue working in partnership with the other churches in the presbytery.

The final objective is to determine when and how to extend this dialogue to the entire congregation in the form of town hall meetings. The joint working group should agree on a format and timetable for such meetings, which can then be presented to the session for approval.

E. Third Meeting

This meeting should follow the congregation's period of spiritual discernment and town hall meetings. The focus should be on deciding whether to pursue reconciliation or to move forward with a congregational vote on leaving the denomination.

If the joint working group's consensus is that there are now viable options for a continued ministry partnership between the congregation and the other churches of the presbytery, the congregational representatives should make that recommendation to the session. If there is no consensus, or if the consensus is that reconciliation is unlikely, the congregational representatives should recommend that the session call a congregational meeting for the purpose of voting on a motion requesting dismissal from the presbytery.

F. Fourth Meeting/Subsequent Meetings

If the session has decided to pursue reconciliation rather than dismissal, or if the congregation has voted not to seek dismissal, the joint working group should meet at least once more to discuss how to heal divisions within the congregation, how to deal with a departing minority (if there is one), and how to improve the congregation's relationship with presbytery and the denomination. It may continue meeting and working together as long these issues persist and as long as it is making progress in resolving these issues.

If the congregation has voted to seek dismissal, the joint working group should meet as soon as possible thereafter to confirm the results of the vote (and that all required procedures were followed) and to begin negotiating the terms that would be presented to the session, the congregation, and the presbytery for approval.

V. Town Hall Meetings

There must be at least one town hall meeting to which the entire church family is invited. The purpose is to provide an opportunity for members of the congregation to engage in dialogue with each other and with representatives of presbytery concerning the issues impelling separation from the denomination. The joint working group may determine that more than one such meeting is required to insure that all members of the congregation have an opportunity to attend and that all issues are fully discussed. These meetings should precede any congregational vote on dismissal by at least 30 days. **No formal action may be taken at these town hall meetings; the meetings are for informational and educational purposes only.** They may also include spiritual discernment components.

Congregational members of the joint working group should plan and lead the discussion at these meetings. Members of the Isaiah 1:18 team must be invited to attend and participate as resources and representatives of presbytery. The role of the Isaiah 1:18 team will be to provide information relevant to the congregation's decision, answer questions, address concerns, and discuss the congregation's ongoing relationship with the presbytery.

VI. Congregational Meeting

After completing the required spiritual discernment and dialogue, the session may call a congregational meeting for the purpose of requesting dismissal from the presbytery. The session shall formulate a proposal that it believes reflects the will of the congregation. Any motion presented to the congregation and any agreement for the departure or division of the church shall include provisions for the dispositions of the property held by or for the church, and the assumption of the liabilities of the church. The proposal must specify the denomination to which the church would be dismissed and what disposition would be made of the church's name and property.

Before the meeting is announced to the congregation, the session must review its rolls and produce an accurate current list of active members. Each member on the active roll shall be given at least 30 days written notice of the meeting. The meeting shall also be announced at all worship services between the date of the call and the congregational meeting.

The meeting shall be moderated by a teaching elder of this presbytery who is not currently serving as pastor or associate pastor of the church considering disaffiliation. If possible, the moderator shall be chosen by the joint working group, with the concurrence of the session. If the joint working group and session are unable to agree, the Isaiah 1:18 team shall choose the moderator.

The quorum at the congregational meeting shall be one-quarter of the active membership, the attendees being recorded by name. A representative of the Isaiah 1:18 team shall be allowed to make a presentation to the congregation at the outset of the meeting, and members of the team shall have the privilege of the floor. Voting shall be by written ballot, with the joint working group serving as tellers.

VII. Dismissal or Division

If the Isaiah 1:18 team concludes that the motion was proper and the vote was fairly conducted and complied in all material respects with the procedures set forth in this policy, it shall certify the results and recommend one of the following actions to presbytery.

A. Unconditional Dismissal

If at least 90% of the congregation members present and voting favor the proposal, the congregation shall be dismissed with its name and property in accordance with the proposal. While the Isaiah 1:18 team may urge the session of the departing church to make some provision for dissenting members, such an arrangement would be voluntary and not a prerequisite to the church's dismissal.

B. Conditional Dismissal

If the vote in favor of the proposal is at least two-thirds but less than 90%, the Isaiah 1:18 team shall negotiate with the session, through the joint working group, to arrive at mutually acceptable terms for the congregation's dismissal. In such cases presbytery will assist dissenting members to form or affiliate with another congregation, and the departing congregation will be expected to support that effort financially in a way that reflects the relative numbers of the two groups.

The details must be worked out in each instance based on the unique facts and circumstances of the particular church. In some cases non-financial terms may assume greater importance. In others there may be outstanding financial obligations that will alter the calculus. As a general rule, however, it will be sufficient if the departing congregation agrees to divide its net assets in a way that reflects the proportion of members present and voting who favored dismissal compared to those who opposed dismissal. Alternatively, it will be sufficient if the departing congregation agrees, for the next five years, to pay a percentage of its average annual contribution to presbytery (measured over the past three years, but not including any year in which it made no contribution or only a token contribution). The percentage would decline 20% per year, from 100% in the first year to 20% in the fifth year.

The departing church would pay these funds or other assets to presbytery for use in assisting the dissenting members, other nearby churches, and for new church development.

If the Isaiah 1:18 team and the session are unable to agree, the Isaiah 1:18 team shall recommend its last best offer to presbytery. If presbytery agrees, those shall be the terms of dismissal.

C. Division

If the vote in favor of the proposal is greater than 50% but less than two-thirds, the Isaiah 1:18 team shall oversee negotiations between the majority and minority factions aimed at resolving the terms on which the two groups shall divide the church's property and other assets so that each may continue to engage in ministry and mission as separate churches, if that is feasible and desired by both groups. The Isaiah 1:18 team shall act as mediator. It may not impose terms, but it is empowered to determine the procedures to be followed, and it must approve the terms of any agreement as accurately reflecting the sentiments of both factions and as fair to all concerned.

There are several patterns for this kind of separation and fair sharing or division of common properties, which the Isaiah 1:18 team may offer as guides to negotiation. Whatever resolution is reached must account for the church's name, records, and history as well as its property.

If the two sides reach impasse, they must submit their dispute, at their own expense, to mediation and ultimately to binding arbitration before a third-party neutral. The third-party neutral may be an individual acceptable to both parties and the Isaiah 1:18 team or may be someone who is selected according to the procedures of an established Christian mediation and arbitration service.

Once an agreement or arbitration award acceptable to the Isaiah 1:18 team has been arrived at, the Isaiah 1:18 team shall recommend it to presbytery for approval.

D. Status of the Pastor

The pastor of a church considering disaffiliation with the PCUSA may express an opinion and be an advocate for a particular position, but must do so in a way that is consistent with the obligation of pastoral care owed to all members of the congregation and the strict neutrality required when moderating the session. The pastor must work with both the majority and minority, as long as they remain members of the congregation.

If the pastor of a church leaving the denomination wishes also to disaffiliate, the Isaiah 1:18 team, in consultation with the committee on ministry, may approve the dismissal of the pastor to another denomination. If the pastor wishes to stay within the PCUSA, the Isaiah 1:18 team, in consultation with the committee on ministry, may approve the dissolution of the pastor's relationship with the departing church and assist the pastor in transitioning to another call. In either case the Isaiah 1:18 team, in consultation with the committee on ministry, shall insure that the presbytery's Dissolution Policy shall be followed for whatever transition the pastor will have to undertake as a result of the congregation's departure.

E. Gracious Separation

If a congregation is approved for dismissal or division under this policy, the Isaiah 1:18 team shall arrange a final worship service of commissioning to celebrate the church's history within the presbytery, to ask a blessing on its continued ministry, and to pray for the well-being of the members it leaves behind. To the extent possible, this tone should extend to all dealings between those who choose to stay and those who choose to leave, recognizing that we labor together in the same vineyard and that what unites us is far greater than what divides us.

VIII. Options for Reconciliation

There are potential options that congregations and the presbytery could prayerfully consider to foster unity, some of which require greater effort and agreement from other councils of our church, some of which are more readily available. This incomplete listing is not intended to reflect recommendations of the presbytery, but is intended to indicate the breadth of options open to us and to encourage expanded dialogue as we open ourselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Some potential options include dual committee / evangelical cluster, union churches, and union presbyteries.

IX. Alternative Procedure

The overriding goal of this process is the creation of an atmosphere where the peaceful discussion and resolution of disagreements as brothers and sisters in Christ can take place. It is therefore incumbent on the session of a disaffected congregation to be committed to the whole process. If the session of a disaffected congregation refuses to cooperate with the Isaiah 1:18 team or fails to follow this policy through to completion, the Isaiah 1:18 team may conduct an investigation pursuant to G-3.0109b(5) to determine the reasons for noncompliance and to assess the current state of affairs in the congregation. If it is unable to persuade the session to begin (or resume) the process of reasoning together laid out in this policy, the Isaiah 1:18 team is authorized to take such additional steps pursuant to G-3.0303e as may be necessary to protect the rights of all members of the congregation and to settle all differences and grievances in a fair and

orderly way. To the extent possible, this process shall follow the same principles and procedures as would apply had the session complied voluntarily with this policy. *Approved May 3, 2012*

Associate Executive Presbyter

The Coordinating Council recommended that the staff position vacated by Michael Davis' resignation remain vacant until a new Executive Presbyter is called. There was no discussion and this was approved.

Proceeds from Sale of Church Property

The Coordinating Council recommended that the proceeds from the sale of any future church properties sold as a result of church closures be directed into funds for New Church Development and/or Church Redevelopment. After discussion, the recommendation was approved.

EXECUTIVE PRESBYTER SEARCH COMMITTEE REPORT

Dr. Stuart Gordon, chair of the EP Search Committee, updated the presbytery on the committee's work. The search committee anticipates calling a special meeting of the presbytery to present a candidate. Dr. Gordon reported that it was a pleasure to serve with this committee (Mary Ellen Aussenbaugh, Wanda Barr, Monnie Caine, Joe Evans, Guy Griffith, Cristi Scott), and he thanked the committee for their hard work.

PERSONNEL MISSION UNIT REPORT

The Rev. Stephen Caine presented the report of the Personnel Mission Unit.

Recognition of Michael Davis and Valerie Blackburn

Rev. Caine stated that Personnel wanted to take the opportunity to say "thanks and good bye" to Michael Davis, Associate for Congregational Development, and Valerie Blackburn, Resource Center Coordinator. Michael resigned to accept a call as pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Hendersonville, effective April 1, and Valerie's contract ended May 30. Rev. Caine spoke to their service to the presbytery, and offered a prayer of thanksgiving for their work and service. The Personnel Mission Unit presented a gift to Michael, who spoke briefly about his work with the presbytery. Valerie was unable to be present, and Personnel would deliver a gift to her.

Revised Personnel Manual

Rev. Caine moved approval of the revised Personnel Manual, and stated that it was a more comprehensive policy, and thanked Linda Badger Becker and Pam Shampain for their work on the document. The Personnel Manual was taken *seriatim*, with questions and comments from commissioners, after which the following revised manual was approved. The Moderator thanked the Personnel Mission Unit for their hard work.

THE PRESBYTERY OF MIDDLE TENNESSEE PERSONNEL MANUAL

PREFACE

In accord with the Book of Order G-3.0110, the presbytery may employ such staff as is required by the mission of the presbytery. The Presbytery of Middle Tennessee employs persons to assist its Coordinating Council and committees in carrying out the mission of the whole church within its bounds.

All staff will be employed in accord with denominational staffing policies G-3.0104, G-3.0106 and G-3.0110.

The Personnel Committee of the presbytery is authorized to evaluate and implement personnel policies relating to all those employed by the Presbytery of Middle Tennessee.

The process of electing executive staff and the hiring of other staff, the description of the responsibilities of each position, the method of performance review, and the manner of termination of employment are provided in the presbytery's personnel policy. All employees are expected to serve in ways that enable the component parts of an interdependent system to work together. Staff persons advise and assist but are neither authorized nor expected to do the work assigned to the members of the presbytery.