

REDSTONE PRESBYTERY
POLICY ON
Congregations Considering
Making a Request to Leave the PC (USA)

I. POLICY STATEMENT:

Redstone Presbytery shall consider a request to leave the Presbyterian Church (U S A) received from any of its constituent congregations, on its own merits and on a case-by-case basis in accordance with the Book Of Order: No generalized prior arrangements or stipulations shall apply except those described in the Book Of Order.

Redstone Presbytery considers it incumbent on the Presbytery and any constituent congregation contemplating such a request to leave the denomination, to engage in the following *“Process For Understanding, Reconciliation & Decision”*. At the time of the Presbytery’s deliberations on such a request, whether or not the requesting congregation has faithfully followed the process below shall be reported to the Presbytery, and will likely have an impact on the outcome of the Presbytery’s deliberations.

Process For Understanding, Reconciliation & Decision

- A) Prior to any congregation seeking to leave the denomination, the session of that congregation, through its clerk, should notify the Stated Clerk of Redstone Presbytery in writing, at least 30 days in advance of the session meeting, that the session has placed the subject on its agenda for discussion and consideration at an impending meeting.
- B) This notification sent from the clerk of session to the Stated Clerk of Redstone Presbytery should include the date, time, and place of the scheduled session meeting, and an invitation to an appointed representative of the Committee On Ministry (to be appointed by the chairperson of COM), two Presbytery representatives appointed by the Moderator of the Presbytery, the Stated Clerk, and the Executive Presbyter to attend said meeting with the privilege of entering fully into the discussion. The rationale for the decision to place this discussion on the agenda of the session must be provided to the Stated Clerk along with notification of the meeting. The rationale must also be received 30 days prior to the meeting of the session.
- C) As soon as practicable, the Stated Clerk of the Presbytery shall advise the Executive Presbyter, the chairperson of the Committee On Ministry, and the Presbytery Moderator of this session’s notification and invitation, and shall request the COM chairperson to appoint a representative of the COM, and the Presbytery Moderator to appoint two Presbytery representatives to attend said meeting.

- D) At said meeting, the discussion should be open, frank, and compassionate, without rancor, and characterized by mutual respect and esteem on the part of all parties, in accord with *“Guidelines For Presbyterians During Times Of Disagreement”* (attached). The discussion should explore:
- 1) The ramifications, for the congregation & the Presbytery, of the congregation’s possible departure from the denomination (including property issues, and continuing care of members who do not wish to leave the PC (U S A));
 - 2) The reasons for the possible departure from the denomination;
 - 3) Careful consideration of avenues of reconciliation, as an alternative to a request to leave the PC (U S A).
- E) At the conclusion of the meeting of the session and representatives of the presbytery, assuming the session deems it needs to proceed with this action, there will be a minimum of a six-month period of discernment before a decision can be made to request to be dismissed from the presbytery to another denomination. It is incumbent on both the congregation and the presbytery to spend that time wisely in conversation around the rationale for requesting dismissal. The presbytery may, at its sole discretion, deem that the effort has been adequate and proceed to the next steps in the process. Subsequent steps will not be implemented until the representatives of the presbytery report that this effort at discernment has been faithfully completed.
- F) After a period of deep discernment, if the congregation desires to proceed with a request to be dismissed by the presbytery, the appointed members of the presbytery, as well as the Stated Clerk and Executive Presbyter, should be allowed to be full partners in that conversation. It shall be up to the appointed members of the presbytery to determine whether this point has been reached with the congregation.
- G) The clerk of session shall notify the Stated Clerk of Redstone Presbytery, in writing, of the congregation’s ~~action~~ request to leave the denomination.
- H) The congregation’s formal request to leave the denomination shall be placed on the docket, as an Order Of The Day, of the next regular stated meeting of Redstone Presbytery which does not have a restricted docket (in March, or May, or September, or November) – provided that 1) the presbytery, by policy, has determined that the discernment process has been completed and; 2) that there is reasonable, ample time for the Stated Clerk to notify all Presbytery commissioners and continuing members at least 10 days in advance that the particular request will be on the docket. A request of this nature SHALL NOT be considered at any special meeting of the Presbytery (because so many members and commissioners of the Presbytery are unable to attend, no matter how carefully selected are the date and time).

- I) Ordinarily, members of the congregation which is seeking to leave of the denomination, shall be permitted to attend this meeting of the Presbytery, and should be granted voice when this particular matter is on the floor so that they may fully enter into the Presbytery's discussion. Of course, the Presbytery always retains the right to go into an executive or closed session.
- J) The Presbytery shall decide, approving or disapproving, the congregation's request to leave the PC (U S A); including all questions pertaining to assets (property and financial), on a case-by-case basis. No predetermined formula for the required percentage of the majority of the congregation's vote, other than the pertinent stipulation of the Book Of Order, nor any other proposed quid pro quo, shall be permitted to "tie the hands of" nor in any way predispose the Presbytery to act on this request one way or the other, except our corporate understanding of the "Trust Clause" and what it means to be a community of faith.
- K) In the event that the congregation decides to make a request to permit the congregation to leave the denomination, all members of the congregation should be apprised in writing, by the clerk of session, within thirty days of the adjournment of the congregational meeting at which this action was taken, of the process available to each member to transfer membership to another congregation of the Presbyterian Church (U S A).

II. RATIONALE for this Policy and the Process For Understanding, Reconciliation & Decision:

*Implementing the Trust Clause for the Unity of the Church**

"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. The Church is a fellowship of believers" (G-4.0201)

Each local congregation is the setting of a particular history of that fellowship; for its members it is the site of baptisms, of confirmations, of marriages, and of celebrations of the resurrection to join the communion of saints. Such significant personal experiences make the local congregation an indelible part of the lives of their members. These shared experiences are what most of us picture when we think of our home congregation.

"The particular churches of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) wherever they are, taken collectively, constitute one church;" (G-4.0301a)

The church is not a voluntary association of those who share the same opinions and experiences, but is an organic body called into existence by God that celebrates and transmits through the ages the name and knowledge of Jesus Christ. The constitutional

provisions under which congregations hold property for the benefit of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) arise out of and reflect our theological conviction that this denomination constitutes one indivisible body, which itself is part of the body of Christ, and which encompasses not only the visible church today but our forebears and heirs in the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

Together we affirm that our God is in control of the world we occupy. We order our affairs out of an abiding conviction that persons do not join the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) of their own volition, but are called to membership in this denomination by the sovereignty of God, and participate in its government through the work of the Holy Spirit. “A presbyterian polity recognizes the responsibility of all members for ministry and maintains the organic relation of all congregations in the church.” (Confession of 1967, § 9.40.)

That polity incorporates these theological principles regarding church property:

I. There is not a unilateral right of a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregation to depart from the denomination or its presbytery of membership.

A. Nothing in our polity provides any such right.

No such authority is given in G-7.0304 (powers of a congregation).

No such authority is given in G-10.0102 (powers of a session).

Dissent is always protected, but defiance is abhorred. (G-9.0303)

B. Congregations may be released only with the approval of their presbytery

G-8.0601: “The relationship to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) of a particular church can be severed only by constitutional action on the part of the presbytery.”

G-11.0103i: “The presbytery is responsible for the mission and government of the church throughout its geographical district. It therefore has the responsibility and power... to divide, dismiss, or dissolve churches in consultation with their members;”

C. “By giving to presbytery rather than to session or congregation the power to dismiss a church, the constitution of this denomination guarantees a formal meeting of presbytery as the forum in which loyalist minorities of whatever size might press their claims that they were sufficient in numbers and dedication to continue a church in its connectional relationship within this denomination.” (PCUS 1976, 92, Strong v. Synod of Mid-South)

II. There are also significant restrictions on how and under what circumstances a presbytery may release a congregation.

A. All such decisions must be made solely upon the basis of advancing the mission of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in the presbytery’s geographic area. “The presbytery ... has the responsibility and power

“to develop strategy for the mission of the church in its area ...” (G-11.0103a)

“mobilizing their [member churches’] strength for the most effective witness to the broader community for which it has responsibility;” (G-11.0103b)

B. The General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission has found that

“[a]n ‘independent’ or ‘congregational’ Presbyterian church is an anomaly which runs

counter to the notion that we are a ‘family’ of churches and dismissal must therefore be made to another church within the family group The ... presbytery had no constitutional right to dismiss ...the churches to independent status. ... The policy of not allowing members and ministers to be cut loose with no ties indicates the historic Presbyterian policy of ecclesiastical connectionalism. This policy likewise forbids ... dismissal to independency.” (PCUS 1973, pp. 119-121, Anderson v. Synod of Florida)

C. Power may not be delegated to another body; the decision must be made at a “formal meeting of the presbytery.” (PCUS 1976, 92, Strong v. Synod of Mid-South)

D. Presbyteries are responsible for enforcing the trust clause:

“All property held by or for a particular church, a presbytery, a synod, the General Assembly, or the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), whether legal title is lodged in a corporation, a trustee or trustees, or an unincorporated association, and whether the property is used in programs of a particular church or of a more inclusive governing body or retained for the production of income, is held in trust nevertheless for the use and benefit of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A).” (G-8.0201)

The purpose of the Trust Clause (G-8.0201) is to support the purposes and mission of the particular church as a part of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) operating under the Constitution of the Church.

The idea of holding property in trust has always been part of the Presbyterian theology and practice as has been recognized by U.S. Supreme Court (Watson v. Jones, 80 U.S. (13 Wall.) 679 (1872)

E. Of course a presbytery cannot release itself, nor all its congregations, for only the General Assembly itself can release or dissolve a presbytery (G-13.0103n).

III. If a presbytery fails to carry out these constitutional responsibilities, the synod may be required to intervene.

A. It may undertake review of the presbytery’s processes and decisions. (G-9.0408)

B. If the synod finds that the presbytery has not been faithful to its Presbyterian mission, (G-9.0409) the synod may direct the presbytery to appropriate action. (G-9.0410)

C. If a presbytery is unable or unwilling to carry out these constitutional responsibilities, the synod may assume jurisdiction over the presbytery’s G-11.0103i, G-8.0201 & G-8.0601 powers. (G-12.0102m,n)

IV. The 217th General Assembly called upon “...every member of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to witness to the church’s visible oneness, to avoid division into separate denominations that obscure our community in Christ, and to live in harmony with other members of this denomination, so that we may with one voice together glorify God in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit; and all sessions, congregations, presbyteries, and synods to renew and strengthen their covenanted partnership with

one another and with the General Assembly.”

*Advisory Opinions: Note 19, General Assembly Advisory Committee on the Constitution

Seeking to be Faithful Together:

Guidelines for Presbyterians During Times of Disagreement

In a spirit of trust and love, we
promise we will..

Give them
a hearing...
listen before
we answer

John 7:51
and Proverbs
18:13

- 1. Treat each other respectfully so as to build trust, believing that we all desire to be faithful to Jesus the Christ;**
 - ◇ we will keep our conversations and communications open for candid and forthright exchange,
 - ◇ we will not ask questions or make statements in a way which will intimidate or judge others.
- 2. Learn about various positions on the topic of disagreement.**
- 3. State what we think we heard and ask for clarification before responding, in an effort to be sure we understand each other.**

Speak the
truth in love

Ephesians 4:15

- 4. Share our concerns directly with individuals or groups with whom we have disagreements in a spirit of love and respect in keeping with Jesus's teaching.**
- 5. Focus on ideas and suggestions instead of questioning people's motives, intelligence or integrity;**
 - ◇ we will not engage in name-calling or labeling of others prior to, during, or following the discussion.
- 6. Share our personal experiences about the subject of disagreement so that others may more fully understand our concerns.**

*M*aintain the
unity of the
spirit in the
bond of
peace

Ephesians 4:3

- 7. Indicate where we agree with those of other viewpoints as well as where we disagree.**
- 8. Seek to stay in community with each other though the discussion may be vigorous and full of tension;**
 - ◇ we will be ready to forgive and be forgiven.
- 9. Follow these additional Guidelines when we meet in decision-making bodies:**
 - ◇ urge persons of various points of view to speak and promise to listen to these positions seriously;
 - ◇ seek conclusions informed by our points of agreement;
 - ◇ be sensitive to the feelings and concerns of those who do not agree with the majority and respect their rights of conscience;
 - ◇ abide by the decision of the majority, and if we disagree with it and wish to change it, work for that change in ways which are consistent with these Guidelines.
- 10. Include our disagreements in our prayers, not praying for the triumph of our viewpoints, but seeking God's grace to listen attentively, to speak clearly, and to remain open to the vision God holds for us all.**