



## DISCERNING THE WAY

A Process for Discerning God's Future for the Relationship  
Between Particular Churches and the PCUSA

### A SUMMARY OF THE PROCESS

When churches are seriously questioning their relationship with the PCUSA the Presbytery of Southern New England has adopted the following process, here described in summary.

First, the full intent of this process is for the church and the presbytery to engage in a series of discernment steps in which they mutually seek what God's will is for their relationship.

Second, the process is divided into several steps:

- When concerns initially arise, a listening team is offered to the congregation. The purpose of this team is to listen to the concerns of the leaders and congregation and to engage with them in developing a process for mutual discernment of God's leading. Normally, this listening will be a time of prayer and conversation aimed at understanding the concerns of the congregation and identifying how the congregation will or will not remain in communion with the PCUSA.
- If concerns continue to exist after the listening team has done its work, then an Administrative Commission is to be appointed.

Third, the mutual expectations to maintain this process are the following:

- Open and honest dealings with each other.
- Free and timely sharing of information with each other.
- Protection of the rights of all involved, especially the minority.

Some principles of discernment guide this document:

#### **An expectation that God desires to guide us**

The church's practice of discernment rests on God's identity as a self-revealing God, One who wants to be made known. Not elusive or capricious, the God who created us has not abandoned us but desires to be in an ongoing relationship with us. Thus our practice of discernment is rooted in a belief in the Triune God who is present with us and will reveal what is needed for the church to be faithful. Therefore openness in prayer at all gatherings is essential.

#### **A willingness to listen**

Recognizing that we are created in God's image and for fellowship with God, we believe we have an ability to hear and respond to God. Thus a basic capacity required for

discernment is a willingness to listen, a readiness to be open to the inner and outer promptings of God's Spirit and to be open to the ways God speaks to us through others. In fact, we need the listening hearts of others, especially those with whom we may disagree, to be able to fully and accurately hear God. Realizing we have a capacity to deceive ourselves, we can trust the Spirit dwelling within us and within our siblings to help us remain honest, open and alert.

### **A commitment to spiritual process and practices**

Christians through the centuries have nurtured their capacity to listen to God by a variety of spiritual practices. Personal prayer, scripture meditation, silence, journal-keeping, spiritual direction, fasting, and worship have all proven helpful. Beyond these individual practices, groups and governing bodies in the church must also engage in communal spiritual practices as a way of nurturing the entire group's capacity to listen to God.

### **A response of obedience**

Because discernment is where prayer and action meet, it is necessary for those who listen to God to respond with obedience. After a group has done its best to discern God's way and has received a shared sense of God's leading, it is essential to test that discernment in the context of the larger Christian community. Only then can it move forward in faithfulness and with confidence. Even though the entire way may not be clear, the group can move toward the future, trusting that God will make further revelations or corrections as needed. When a group finds itself divided and still unsure how God is leading, it is important not to move ahead but to wait for further guidance. More prayer and listening, both to each other and the larger community of faith, are required.

Adapted from "Discernment: A River Runs Through It: Flowing with the Current of the Spirit in Church Meetings" by Marlene Kropf, Congregational and Ministerial Leadership, Mennonite Church USA

## **LISTENING TEAM**

When the leadership of the presbytery becomes aware, either through formal congregational action, communication from the session, or through informal contacts with congregational leaders or members, that a congregation or its leadership are seriously questioning their continued relationship with the PCUSA, the Roundtable or General Presbyter will offer a pastoral visit by a Listening Team. Team members and their leaders will be selected by the Moderator, Vice Moderator and Chair of Roundtable with the advice of the General Presbyter. The purpose of this team is to listen to the concerns of the leaders and congregation and to engage with them in developing a process for mutual discernment of God's leading that involves the congregational leaders, the congregation membership and the presbytery. The listening team will also share with the leaders and members of the congregation the process outlined in this document titled, "Discerning the Way" and, if appropriate, seek to create an informal covenant between all parties to abide by this process or something similar jointly agreed upon. Normally, this listening will be a time of prayer and conversation aimed at understanding the concerns of the congregation and identifying steps toward how the congregation will or will not remain in communion with the PCUSA. Team size will be dictated by the anticipated scope of effort, e.g. meeting with several small groups will require a bigger team than

meeting with a session only. If, during the initial visits, the team determines that progress can be made toward reconciliation through continued dialogue, the team will make recommendations to the Presbytery for conducting this continued dialogue. If this team effort leads to resolution of the situation, no further action is required and to God be the glory!

If concerns cannot be addressed, then an Administrative Commission shall be appointed. It shall consist of 3-7 members, balanced as evenly as may be practicable, given its number, between Ministers of Word and Sacrament and elders representing various theological perspectives of the Presbytery as best as possible. The duties and powers of the Administrative Commission are listed below and it shall make a full report to the Presbytery consisting of the information below for action.

- to request records of the session;
- to look at whatever records may be relevant (i.e., how money is held, title to property, insurance documents, mortgages or other loan documents, corporate officers, corporate articles, bylaws, deeds, charters – especially recent changes in any of these);
- to give directives on behalf of the presbytery to correct the irregularity or delinquency.
- To make a financial assesment of any owed per capita. It is the policy of the Presbytery that all unpaid per capita must be paid in full in order to be dismissed.
- To make a financial assesment of the full value of all Church property (inclusive of a manse if applicable) by securing three independent property appraisals. It is the policy of the Presbytery that no less than 50% of the property value must be paid to the Presbytery in order to be dismissed. The property value will be an average of these three appraisals, the cost of which will be borne by the congregation seeking to leave and the Presbytery, 50/50.
- To determine which reformed body the Congregation seeks to be dismissed to, and to be in correspondence with this reformed body to confirm that they are willing to recieve the Congregation.

## MAINTAINING THE PROCESS

The processes described in this document are based on the willingness of all parties to be in joint discernment of God's will and to work towards a mutually agreeable implementation of what they discern God's will to be. That requires a high level of trust, communication and openness. Some of the expectations that this process has of all parties are these:

- The congregation and the Presbytery (including clergy, officers, and team members) are open and honest in all their dealings with each other.
- The congregation and the Presbytery (including clergy, officers, and team members) provide all requested information and documents to each other on a timely basis.
- The congregation's clergy and officers are willing to protect the rights of the officers and members in the congregation who desire that the congregation remain

part of the PCUSA, or who desire to remain congregants of another PCUSA church.

- The congregation and the Presbytery (including clergy, officers, and team members) refrain from any unauthorized, unilateral changes in the way their assets are held or managed and do not initiate legal proceedings against the other party.

*updated and approved by the Presbytery after a second reading, September 2023*