

Report of the Ecclesiastical Relations Task Force

May, 2024

Preface

A petition to the session dated September 19, 2023 stated:

“Many PC(USA) clergy question the authority of Scripture, the divinity of Christ, and His role as our only hope for salvation. The denomination has adopted unbiblical stances on marriage, sexuality, and the sanctity of life from conception, and has become more interested in political activism than Biblical ministry.

As we look toward the inevitable need to someday call a new pastor, this issue becomes urgent. Limited to PC(USA) clergy, it is unlikely we would secure someone matching our traditional, Biblical values. In contrast, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church is full of young pastors who are eager to continue the sort of ministry we have nurtured at Greenwood. Affiliating with the EPC would secure our position as a church, helping us to attract and retain those who may turn away from our PC(USA) affiliation.”

The letter concluded:

“We dearly love the church and its people, and fear for its future should we remain in this denomination. We urge the session to create a task force, ultimately putting this issue before congregational vote.”

Who could have predicted in September that the “inevitable need to someday call a new pastor” would have been sadly thrust upon Greenwood Church just six months later. The already-difficult process of discernment and exploration took on a whole new level of complication and grief with the loss of our dear pastor. It also significantly expedited the timetable in compiling research, spending time in prayer, and having conversations with one another.

Much of the following research was received by Pastor Clark from the First Presbyterian Church of Newport when Greenwood last evaluated its denominational affiliation in 2014-2015. It has been updated and revised to give context to the considerations faced by Greenwood’s task force during many hours of prayerful meetings, conversations with churches that have already exited the PC(USA), and communication with leaders of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) and Evangelical Covenant Order (ECO). The document concludes with our recommendation to the session and congregation.

These materials are offered with our love and prayers for all in this congregation and our sincere hope that the Spirit will lead this church into a new chapter of Biblical ministry together.

*The following data is adapted/updated from materials prepared by the
First Presbyterian Church of Newport, July, 2011.*

The most important aspect of dealing with denominational issues is to understand who we are and what we stand for. Without this solid basis, we will be unable to make the important decisions that will determine our future as it relates to our denomination.

This is clearly stated on the Greenwood website, under **WHAT WE BELIEVE:**

- *That Jesus Christ alone is the Lord of all and the way of salvation.*
- *That Holy Scripture is the triune God's revealed Word, the Church's only infallible rule of faith and life.*
- *That God's people are called to holiness in all aspects of life. This includes honoring the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman, the only relationship within which sexual activity is appropriate.*

Presbyterian Church (USA)

The Presbyterian Church (USA) or PC(USA) was formed in a 1983 merger between the former Presbyterian Church of the United States (PCUS) and the United Presbyterian Church (UPC). It is the ninth-largest Protestant denomination, and one of several Presbyterian branches. The denomination is governed by regional presbyteries; ours is the Presbytery of Southern New England (PSNE), comprising churches in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. Nationally, there are synods which oversee the presbyteries; ours is the Synod of the Northeast, representing presbyteries in the New England states, New York and New Jersey. Representatives from each presbytery come together at the General Assembly (GA), a national meeting, where denomination-wide policies are created or modified by votes. For more information about the PC(USA), visit www.pcusa.org.

We, and all other churches in the PC(USA), agree to abide by the Book of Order, which contains regulations on church government, discipline, and worship. We also have The Book of Confessions, which consists of confessions of faith by which we agree to be guided. Both of these important documents are subject to change by the GA and voted upon by the presbyteries. Many of the differences between the PC(USA) and the theology that we espouse center on changes in the Book of Order and the Book of Confessions. One such change allows same-sex marriage in the church, and changes ordination standards. These were discussed in more detail in a 2014 letter from Pastor Clark and Clerk of Session Elaine Magyar to the PSNE, included as Exhibit A.

Advantages of Being Part of a Denomination

Ideally, the support, encouragement, resources, consistency and accountability that congregations within a denomination share can profoundly strengthen the ministry of the local church. When working properly, a denominational connection can:

- Extend our church's reach into the world
- Keep us in line with Christian doctrine
- Hold the church accountable to healthy and honest ways of dealing with our difficulties

A denomination should enable churches together to do more as a group than all of them could do independently and multiply the effectiveness of the resources they invest together. Sadly, over the past decades our denomination has become more factious and less united.

Decline in PC(USA) Membership

Church membership in the U.S., especially in mainline churches, has declined in recent decades, and PC(USA) is no exception. In 1965 there were 4.5 million members between the two former denominations. Since they united, PC(USA) membership has gone from 3.1 million in 1983 to 1.1 million in 2022. Combined membership has dropped 75% since 1965.

Explaining this Decline

A growing number of clergy within the PC(USA) has questioned and compromised the authority of Scripture, and an increasing number are taking positions that are inconsistent with the historical tenets of our faith. More and more within the denomination no longer guard orthodoxy, but pick and choose the parts of Scripture that they believe to be true rather than holding the Bible as the truth. Through this perspective, Jesus can be seen as merely a way rather than the only way to God and salvation; compassion becomes detached from truth, theological diversity becomes more important than discipleship, and social action becomes more important than Christian spiritual obedience.

Survey Results Confirm PC(USA) Clergy Beliefs

A 2008 survey by a PC(USA) panel underscored how far our denomination has departed from the essentials of the faith that we espouse. That survey showed that only 35% of PC(USA) ministers and 22% of specialized clergy (those whose pastoral duties are not in churches, but often in hospitals, etc.) responded that they agreed that "only followers of Jesus Christ can be saved." Put another way, 65% of ordained PC(USA) ministers believe there are other ways to God and salvation. A PC(USA) publication entitled *What Presbyterians Believe* states: "For some the Bible is inerrant; for others it is not necessarily factual, but it breathes with the life of God," asserting that God's Word can be found in the Bible rather than the Bible *being* the Word of God. We hear this view expressed at our own presbytery meetings, where when reading Scripture, the worship leader says, "Listen for the Word of God," rather than "Listen to the Word of God."

Why this is important

We must decide if the differences between our stated core beliefs and those that crept into our denomination are acceptable or not. We must closely examine the current issues and decide the course we need to take. There is confusion and uncertainty in our congregation that can no longer be ignored.

The Main Issues

Biblical authority is the primary issue. The key is whether or not the PC(USA) still accepts Scripture as inerrant and authoritative. This appears to no longer be the case. Many theological questions must be resolved. Is Scripture the inerrant and infallible Word of God or not?

Is what is written in the Bible the truth or not? Is God the same, unchanging from age to age? Is sin as written in the Bible still sin in today's world? Is Jesus the Way to salvation or not? To evangelical Christians, the answers are clear. To many clergy in the PC(USA), they are not. To many in authority in PC(USA), the Bible is open to man's interpretation, leading to a dilution of God's Word. We must decide where we stand and declare where we stand.

Greenwood's Ecclesiastical Task Force

Because of the movement of the PC(USA) away from essential beliefs of the Christian faith and Scriptural standard, in September 2023, Greenwood's Session voted to establish an Ecclesiastical Task Force (ETF) of five elders who were tasked to examine possible dismissal from PC(USA) and affiliation with another Presbyterian denomination. ETF appointed members are Marcia Camilleri Camp, Kevin Golde, Sam Koldyk, Wayne Meunier, and Emmy Kmet. Other church members provided support.

Kevin Golde volunteered to contact other churches that have left the PC(USA), and spoke with Tracy Johnson, pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church in Springfield, MA. Rev. Johnson was pastor when they moved from the PC(USA) to the EPC (Evangelical Presbyterian Church) in 2014. He said the move has been a "life-giving move." Pastor Johnson suggested that some Greenwood elders attend EPC Presbytery meetings to learn more. Pastor Johnson referred Kevin to David and Lynn Brogren, chairs of the EPC Church Development Team. They met with our Task Force on Zoom in October 2023. Greenwood's session was invited to attend this meeting.

David and Lynn Brogren suggested that the ETF attend the Meeting of the Presbytery of the East (POTE) in January which took place at Great Valley EPC in Malvern, PA. Kevin Golde, Wayne Meunier, and Jeff Black attended, and Kevin provided a detailed summary (Exhibit C), which outlines the resources that the EPC has to offer.

Pastor Clark's son, Steve Clark, is an ordained Pastor of the Evangelical Covenant Order (ECO). Steve met with the ETF, and he recommended the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) as being very closely aligned with Greenwood's theology.

Steve also mentioned that the EPC theology closely aligns with his denomination (ECO) and there is reciprocity between these denominations in regard to ordained Pastors. While Steve currently serves a PC(USA) congregation, he is only able to serve as assistant pastor. He decided not to pursue ordination in the PC(USA) due to doctrinal discomfort. EPC affiliation would enable Greenwood to hire someone like Steve as sole/senior pastor.

Kevin Golde's report favorably noted his impressions in regard to the prayerful, positive, and Biblical based proceedings that he observed at the EPC presbytery meeting. Kevin's report concludes by "Urging us to move forward and join the Evangelical Presbyterian Church." The task force recommended to the Session that Greenwood pursue seeking dismissal from PC(USA), and joining the EPC.

Implications for Our Future

Presbyteries, through their Committees on Ministry (COMs), must approve pastors called by congregations. Thus, even if a congregation wants to call a pastor, COMs could refuse the call. In the PC(USA), we may no longer be able to call a Pastor who shares our congregation's declared principles and beliefs. With the passage of further changes to the Book of Order, the freedom and independence of the local church are even less likely.

Reasons the Task Force is Recommending Leaving the PC(USA)

1. An increasingly large percentage of PC(USA) Pastors and leaders are taking positions that are inconsistent with the historical tenets of the Christian faith, and the denomination has urged us to live together with an ever-increasing theological diversity, inclusiveness and world view.
2. Because we are part of PC(USA), Greenwood has been viewed cautiously by newcomers seeking a Biblical church, until they see us for what we really are. This has discouraged new arrivals in the area from worshiping with us.
3. Mistrust of our denomination has caused us to limit our financial support to its institutions, although we do support some individual PC(USA) missionaries.
4. For years, church leaders have dedicated extra time and resources to defend our principles in denominational struggles in addition to our church responsibilities. We would like to put this behind us in order to concentrate on more effective ministry and mission and enjoy fellowship with a presbytery with which we share common values.

Options

The following explains three options for our future – none of which has been chosen. Each has advantages and consequences. The ultimate choice will be made by the church members.

1. Remain in the PC(USA) and align with the new denominational constitutional changes
2. Remain in the PC(USA) but fight what the denomination has become, and urge its repentance.
3. Request dismissal from the PC(USA) to another established Reformed denomination.

1. Remain in the PC(USA) and align with the new denominational constitutional changes

a. Pro:

- 1) Acceptance of denominational policy would preclude paying a dismissal fee, and we could put the controversy behind us, if that is what the congregation decides. Dismissal costs in other presbyteries have ranged from zero to hundreds of thousands of dollars. Simsbury has a congregation of about half the size of Greenwood and was required to pay \$105,000 over eight years. When the amount was approved by presbytery, it was said to “not set a precedent.”
- 2) Remaining would preclude more informational meetings and discussions, meeting with presbytery teams, and negotiating dismissal.
- 3) We would avoid a legal dispute over ownership of property.
- 4) We would maintain a presence and voice in the PSNE. Our voice in the presbytery is not without value and we still might have an effect on some decisions made by the presbytery.

b. Con:

- 1) We would remain under the ecclesiastical authority of a denomination that claims the name of Christian but whose leadership allows its ordained ministers to deny all the essential doctrines of the Christian faith.
- 2) We would be accepting the loss of independence as we call a new pastor.
- 3) Staying could be construed as simply ignoring denominational problems, hoping they will go away. Pastor Clark fulfilled his obligation by attending presbytery meetings, expressing his views and voting according to Scripture. Unfortunately, his input was marginalized or ignored for years, as can be attested to by those

who attended these meetings. Our ability to influence our presbytery on important theological issues continues to decline, especially as other evangelical churches move to leave the denomination.

- 4) A legal dispute over the property is unlikely now that the Discerning the Way process has as one of its principles that no legal proceedings are to be initiated by either party. This has proven true with other churches in the process of leaving the denomination.

2. Remain in the PC(USA) but fight what the denomination has become, and urge its repentance

A PC(USA) organization supported by over 1,000 pastors and elders, many from large churches, including nine of the fifteen largest in the denomination, called Fellowship PC(USA) has formed because they do not want to remain locked in an unending controversy which they believe will only continue a slow denominational demise. They seek to reform PC(USA) or devise a new body within or outside PC(USA). Some of their values include:

1. A minimalist structure, replacing bureaucracy and most rules with relational network of common purpose;
2. Property and assets under stewardship of the local Session;
3. An atmosphere of support for congregations both within and outside of the PC(USA)

a. Pro:

- 1) Reforming PC(USA) from within would be the ideal solution if the denomination could provide sufficient autonomy for the local congregation

b. Con:

- 1) This would still put us under the leadership of the Presbytery and limit our available pool of clergy

3. Request dismissal from the PC(USA) to another established Reformed denomination

a. Pro:

- 1) To be associated with a church organization which holds more closely to our core beliefs
- 2) To maintain our freedom to select pastors who fit our church beliefs without the need to have those choices approved by the PSNE

- 3) To maintain our freedom from interference by the presbytery and synod in congregational affairs
- 4) To attract future members who might be put off by the PC(USA)'s increasingly non-Scriptural positions
- 5) To attend presbytery meetings where our voice is not only heard but our congregational needs are supported in a life-giving manner

b. Con:

- 1) There would most likely be an exit fee, but we would not expect to lose our property and assets. The Discerning the Way process does not advocate seizure of church property.

Options for the Type of Church we Might Seek

It is important to understand that under the PC(USA) Book of Order, the presbytery has the constitutional power to “dismiss” a church with its property to another Reformed denomination. Any other form of separation requires the presbytery to “dissolve” the church’s membership in PC(USA) and all church assets would likely revert to the presbytery.

Many church members have been Presbyterian their whole lives. We take pride in being Presbyterian, but we believe the Great Commission is not about particular denominations, and that our loyalty belongs first to Jesus Christ, then to our church family, and then to a denomination. PC(USA) began as a powerful collection of churches that shared essential beliefs, traditions and common mission, but apostasy and an overriding concern for inclusiveness above Scriptural truth have now diluted these original principles.

We understand there are a number of church members who oppose leaving PC(USA); some feel that by seeking dismissal from the PC(USA) we risk being seen as exclusive, intolerant and limiting, to the extent of not welcoming those whose views differ from ours. Others feel strongly that we must adhere strictly to Scripture in denominational issues. Our core beliefs remain the same whether we are with the PC(USA) or another denomination. Greenwood has and will continue to welcome and offer the love of Christ to all.

How Denominational Issues are Affecting Membership and Other Programs at Greenwood

Sadly, Greenwood’s membership rolls are down, and we believe one of the reasons is because PC(USA) policies are causing members to leave and potential members to not even consider joining. We know this from discussions with members who are no longer attending, and visitors who, despite being impressed with Greenwood, have declined to join us. When deciding what curricula and resources to use, many of our own employees and lay leaders have found PC(USA) educational materials unsuitable for years.

Discerning the Way Process

The PC(USA) and PSNE tightly control the process under which member churches are allowed to consider disaffiliation and joining another Presbyterian denomination.

The PSNE approved an updated “Discerning the Way” policy in September of 2023 (Exhibit B). This policy is a step by step discernment process, with specific requirements, including that “...*no less than 50% of the property value must be paid to the Presbytery in order to be dismissed.*” The final actual percentage would be determined through a negotiated process. Refer to the policy for details.

When PSNE became informed that the Session created the Ecclesiastical Task Force (ETF) to review alternative denominations and possible dismissal from PC(USA) in September of 2024, they initiated the Discerning the Way process.

The Discerning the Way Process involves the following steps, which can be reviewed in more detail in the procedure (Exhibit B):

STEP #1

“When concerns initially arise, a listening team is offered to the congregation.” The listening team will “...identify how the congregation will or will not remain in communion” with PC(USA).

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.”

STEP #2

“If concerns continue to exist after the listening team has done its work, then an Administrative Commission is to be appointed.”

The Administrative Commission “...shall consist of 3-7 members, balanced...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 must make a full report to the Presbytery addressing these items:

1. *To request records of the session;*
2. *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);

- 3. To give directives on behalf of the presbytery to correct the irregularity or delinquency.*
- 4. To make financial assessment 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.*
- 5. To make a financial assessment 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.*
- 6. To determine which reformed body the Congregation seeks to be dismissed to, and to be in correspondence with the reformed body to confirm that they are willing to receive the Congregation.*

Outreach and Missionaries

If we were to leave PC(USA), none of our current missionaries would necessarily be affected. We have supported many of them for years, enjoyed a close relationship with them, and shared in their accomplishment of God's work around the world. We support most of them directly and those we do support through PC(USA) or PSNE could be paid directly. We do not send any undesignated money through the larger PC(USA) denomination; therefore, there is no reason why we would not continue to support any missionaries approved by the mission committee.

Process of Change

If we were to disaffiliate, we would seek affiliation with a Reformed denomination whose form of government is similar to what we have today and is aligned with our theological beliefs, our mission outreach, our vision and our calling to fulfill the Great Commission. There would not be any outward changes in how the church is organized or conducts itself. We would continue to be led by Session and to worship as Session directs. A positive change would be a greater focus on ministry and missions as the significant burden and time demands required for dealing with PC(USA) denominational issues would be lifted from the church leadership.

Denominational Options for Greenwood if Dismissed

The following are among the reformed denominations to which a PC(USA) church may be dismissed:

- Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC)
- Evangelical Covenant Order (ECO)
- Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)
- Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC)
- Reformed Church in America (RCA)
- Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC)

Three Reformed denominations in the Northeast are the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) and Evangelical Covenant Order (ECO). Listed below are some statistics and denominational stances on a number of issues for comparison. The congregation should be aware that no denomination is perfect. Ordination of women is not permitted in PCA, and the EPC resolved to allow any congregation to make its own decision on this matter. Most churches departing PC(USA) have affiliated with EPC, a missional denomination.

Question	PC(USA)	EPC	ECO	PCA
Who is Jesus?	Debated	God/The Way	God/The Way	God/The Way
Authority of Scripture	Debated	Authoritative/Infallible	Authoritative/Infallible	Authoritative/Infallible
Property Ownership	Disputed	Local congregation	Local congregation	Local congregation
Ordination of Women	Yes	Yes/Local Church's Option	Yes	No
Gay/Lesbian Ordination	Yes	No	No	No
Abortion	Unclear	Pro-Life	Pro-Life	Pro-Life
Number of churches	8,705	600	383	1,934
Number of members	1,140,665	145,000	129,765	393,528

Exhibits/Attachments

Exhibit A: Letter of August 14, 2014 from Pastor Clark and Elaine Magyar to the Presbytery of Southern New England

Exhibit B: Discerning the Way procedure

Exhibit C: Kevin Golde's report on EPC regional Presbytery meeting – January, 2024

Final Recommendation of GCCP Ecclesiastical Relations Task Force, May, 2024

In the “Pastor’s Greeting” which still welcomes visitors to Greenwood’s church website, Pastor Clark wrote, in part:

“Every aspect of the church’s structure and organization is designed to help us become a vibrantly worshipful community of faith in Jesus Christ.

Speaking personally, my professional goal as a pastor and my compelling, personal motivation as a Christian is to be an agent through whom God the Son can draw people to Himself.

To that end, it is my prayer that our church will ever continue to worship God as a community of faith in Jesus Christ.”

The question for Greenwood Church is how we may best continue to be a community rooted in Jesus Christ and how we can allow God the Son to draw people to Himself through our ministries. If we turn to the Scriptures, encounters with Jesus are life-changing, fully-embodied episodes which leave His followers impacted every moment of every day for the rest of their earthly lives ... and beyond. This ought to be our goal as a community of faith: to design every aspect of our church to move the congregation closer to a 24/7 relationship with the Living Word.

It has become clear that a diversity of perspectives exists in our congregation. Of course, the desire would be to avoid conflict and to reach a mutually-workable compromise. Unity cannot be achieved, however, without a shared commitment to the Holy Scriptures and to the need of mankind to accept Jesus Christ as the singular source of salvation. The Scriptures warn against lukewarmness (Revelation 3:16); at this point, a decision must be made.

The ecclesiastical relations task force recommends the Evangelical Presbyterian Church as the denomination which would enable Greenwood Church not only to continue its existing life and ministry, but to thrive into the future. It is most likely that if Greenwood were to switch to the EPC overnight, **no detectable differences might be noticed**, except:

- Access to strong, Bible-based preaching
- A wealth of resources for pastors, elders, and deacons
- Life-giving Presbytery gatherings
- The promise that the EPC would NEVER claim our property
- The ability to welcome ALL into our congregation – and the ability to share the full Word of God with those who sit in our pews.

After extensive prayer and research, we believe this is the best path forward for our church family. We urge the session to pursue dismissal to the EPC as soon as possible, and implore the congregation to support this initiative.