

FLINT RIVER PRESBYTERY DISCERNMENT AND DISMISSAL POLICY

The Church of Jesus Christ is one church. “Unity is God’s gift to the Church in Jesus Christ. Just as God is one God and Jesus Christ is our Savior, so the Church is one because it belongs to its one Lord, Jesus Christ. The Church seeks to include all people and is never content to enjoy the benefits of Christian community for itself alone. There is one Church, for there is one Spirit, one hope, ‘one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4:4-5).” *Book of Order F-1.0302(a)*

As Presbyterians, we adhere to a connectional system of government. It is our desire and prayer that all of the churches of Flint River Presbytery remain in Flint River Presbytery regardless of any decision or controversy in our denomination. The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A), the former Presbyterian Church U.S, and some civil courts have established that all property (real and personal) of a specific congregation is held in trust for the use and benefit of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). *Book of Order G-4.02 Church Property*

Flint River Presbytery will consider requests for dismissal from a member congregation to another Reformed church on a case-by-case basis and will also consider requests regarding retention of the property held in trust by the departing congregation. The process and agreements required by this policy are **pre-conditions** for such considerations. No dismissal to independent status will be considered by the Presbytery, and congregations that choose to become independent or do not meet the pre-conditions in this policy will be dissolved by Flint River Presbytery and **all property and assets** will revert to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Flint River Presbytery is committed to pursuing reconciliation with pastors, sessions, and congregations who are considering a request to dismiss from our denomination. It is the intent of this Presbytery to create a context and process in which the will of God is sought for the life, ministry, and calling of the particular congregation. As the Church of Jesus Christ, the Presbytery and the particular congregation will be guided by these three principles:

1. The mission of God as expressed in the *Great Ends of the Church* is greater than the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Therefore, we affirm that should the Presbytery dismiss a congregation to another Reformed body, the unity of the one Church of Jesus Christ has not been diminished. *Book of Order F-1.0302 and F-1.0304*
2. The exercise of mutual forbearance is of utmost importance in this process. Therefore, it is expected that all parties involved will treat each other with respect regardless of theological and/or ecclesiological differences.
3. We will pray for each other, seek God’s will and work for fairness in all decisions.

THE DISCERNMENT PROCESS

The discernment process for potential request for dismissal from the denomination shall begin with the session of a particular congregation. A session finding it necessary to initiate this process shall put the matter to a sessional vote. The session members must be given adequate notice of the meeting (so determined by the session's usual process or by their Manual of Operations), and a quorum (also designated by the session and/or Manual of Operations) must be present along with the Moderator of Session to conduct business. If the session votes by a two-thirds majority to initiate the discernment process, the Clerk of Session shall contact the Flint River Presbytery and give the Stated Clerk of Presbytery a **written** notice of this desire.

The session shall then call a congregational meeting for the purpose of voting on two issues. The first is whether or not to participate in the discernment process put forth in this document. The second issue is to establish a quorum of no less than 50% of active members as of the date of the notification letter sent to all active members for any future meetings to vote on requesting dismissal from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The Moderator of Session shall moderate this congregational meeting, or make a request that the Presbytery appoint a moderator if there is any reason the Moderator is unable to perform this duty. The Clerk of Session shall inform the Stated Clerk of Flint River Presbytery **in writing** of the results of this congregational meeting to determine the next steps.

If the congregation votes to participate in the discernment process, a Discernment Team will be formed consisting of four representatives from the church and four representatives from the Presbytery. The session shall select the representatives from the church: one from the church staff, one from the session and two at-large active members of the congregation. The Advisory Board of the Presbytery, acting on behalf of Flint River Presbytery, shall designate two Ruling Elders and two Ministers of Word and Sacrament to represent the Presbytery in the discernment process. A facilitator for meetings subsequent to the initial meeting of the Discernment Team shall also be designated by the Advisory Board. This person will have **voice only** at the meetings of the Discernment Team and will not be one of the members of the Discernment Team as selected by the congregation and the Presbytery.

The Stated Clerk of Flint River Presbytery (or the Clerk's designee) will convene the *first meeting only* of the Discernment Team. At this initial meeting, the Discernment Process will be reviewed and the Discernment Team shall covenant to meet together regularly on mutually agreed upon dates with the following goals:

- To communicate faith stories and the Discernment Team members' understanding of the spiritual and theological issues at stake between the congregation and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
- To offer the opportunity for all members of the team to openly dialogue on differences and on common theological and ecclesiastical ground between the congregation and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

- To develop ways for members of the congregation to share their faith stories and concerns with the Discernment Team with the assurance that their voice is heard.
- At an appropriate point in the process, the Discernment Team will share a written report of the listening and discerning process with the congregation by way of a letter prepared by the Discernment Team and sent to each active member.

If the Discernment Process leads to a continued, and even a transformed, relationship between the congregation, Flint River Presbytery, and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Discernment Team may assist the session in developing a covenant agreement that reaffirms and articulates the nature of the reconciliation of the concerns of the congregation. If, however, the Discernment Process does not lead to a desire by the congregation for a continued relationship with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the next step is to begin the dismissal request process.

PROCESS FOR SEEKING DISMISSAL

If a congregation still desires to consider being dismissed to another Reformed body, the session shall call a congregational meeting to debate the question: “Shall the _____ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) request dismissal to another Reformed body of its choice?” The Clerk of Session shall notify the Stated Clerk of Flint River Presbytery *30 days in advance of the date and time of this called congregational meeting*. All members on the active roll of the church must be notified in writing of the meeting and its purpose at least *30 days in advance*. The quorum for this meeting shall be at least 50% of the active members of the congregation. In order to continue the dismissal request process, the congregation must vote approval by a two-thirds majority of those present and eligible to vote. *A report from the Discernment Team may be given at this meeting for information*. The Moderator of Session will moderate this congregational meeting unless he or she is unable to do so. The Moderator of Session may request that Presbytery appoint a moderator for this meeting. The congregational members desiring to be dismissed shall determine the terms of admission to the Reformed body with which they desire to join and secure a written conditional acceptance agreement for presentation to both the congregation and to the Stated Clerk of Flint River Presbytery. The secretary of the congregational meeting must notify the Stated Clerk of the Presbytery in writing of the decision made at the congregational meeting within two weeks. If the vote is to continue the dismissal process, the Advisory Board, acting on behalf of Flint River Presbytery, shall establish an Administrative Commission and determine the power granted to this commission. The Administrative Commission will oversee the dismissal process but shall not preclude any party to be heard by the full body of Flint River Presbytery upon request.

Upon an affirmative vote by the congregation to request dismissal from the denomination, a second congregational meeting will be held no earlier than six months and no later than nine months after the initial vote for the Presbytery to consider the request to dismiss the congregation to another Reformed body. **If no action is taken by the congregation beyond the nine months, Presbytery may consider the original request null and void since action was not taken within the prescribed time limits.** All active members of the congregation must be notified in writing of the meeting and its purpose at least 30 days in advance. The quorum of the second meeting will be at least 50% of the active members of the congregation, and dismissal requires a two-thirds approval vote of active members present and eligible to vote. The second meeting shall be moderated by a Presbytery-appointed moderator. Upon conclusion of debate, the moderator shall require a **signed ballot vote** indicating the active member's desire to remain with the denomination or to dismiss to another Reformed body. The signed ballots will be counted by two Presbytery-appointed individuals with the option for observation of the counting by members of the session. The results of the ballots will be reported to the moderator, who will report them to the congregation. The ballots will be retained by the Presbytery. If the vote is to request dismissal, the signed ballots serve as a way for Flint River Presbytery to provide care and consideration to those voting to remain in the denomination in accordance with the Book of Order.

The Administrative Commission will negotiate the terms of dismissal considering the property and assets as a tool for the accomplishment of the mission of Jesus Christ in the world through the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). A final dismissal settlement for a congregation shall include:

- Assurance that conditional acceptance by the Reformed body with whom the congregation desires to join has been properly received and processed
- Determination of the effective date of the dismissal of the departing congregation
- An assessment of the value of all property and assets to be done in collaboration with the Flint River Presbytery Trustees. The congregation of the departing church shall not sell, transfer, or otherwise dispose of any property to any entity outside the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) during the dismissal process without obtaining **written** permission from Flint River Presbytery. *Book of Order G-4.02 Church Property*
- An agreement to contribute to the ongoing work of Flint River Presbytery in the service of Jesus Christ the greater of: the per-member share of the current Presbytery budget or the average of the congregation's past three years' requested pledge to the Presbytery. The contributions will continue for 5 years on a sliding scale (Year 1 – 100%; Year 2 – 80%; Year 3 – 60%; Year 4 – 40%; Year 5 – 20%)

- Written statement of support for a viable minority who wish to remain in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The Administrative Commission will determine a fair and equitable settlement with the dismissed congregation to be used by the Presbytery to assist the development of a new congregation within Flint River Presbytery comprised primarily and initially of those desiring to remain within the denomination.
- Address any issues related to membership rolls, insurance policies, Board of Pension dues, outstanding loans, corporate documents or any other item which needs to be changed, revised or terminated prior to dismissal to reflect the new status of the dismissed congregation
- Other items as determined by the Administrative Commission

The final negotiated dismissal settlement shall be communicated to the session and to the congregation and must be approved by Flint River Presbytery. The departing congregation shall agree not to contest the actions of the Presbytery during the dismissal process except through the Rules of Discipline, and if the Presbytery grants property to the departing congregation they, and the Reformed body receiving them, shall agree not to dispute the decisions of Flint River Presbytery in any civil litigation.

The pre-conditions stated in this policy are necessary for dismissal request consideration but should not be considered as sufficient to provide dismissal with any right to property. A major consideration will be the impact on the future mission and ministry of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in the local area. The Presbytery shall make the decision about dismissal or dissolution and the disposition of all property in each separate case after careful consideration of all the circumstances. (G-4.02)

Adopted March 15, 2018 by the Advisory Board