POLICY FOR CONVERSATIONS WITH THOSE CONSIDERING SEPARATION FROM THE PC (U.S.A.)

As brothers and sisters in faith and fellow believers in our unity with all those who consider themselves not just Reformed and not just Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) but rather disciples of Jesus Christ, the following document relies heavily on our willingness to sit at table together with those who share different experiences and intentions than ourselves. We rely upon our call to be reconciled with those with whom we disagree before taking claims to entities outside of our body. We rely upon Christ’s model to speak plainly and honestly with those in our community before taking steps to do damage to that community. We rely upon the power of the Holy Spirit to break down the dividing walls between us so that we might be reconciled to Christ before shutting down lines of communication between one another. (Matthew 5:23-25; Ephesians 2:15-16)

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

• The Kingdom of God and the one “holy catholic church” are broader than any one denomination. Nevertheless, as Presbyterians we have committed to our particular Presbyterian expression of the universal church. F-3.0201

• We are deeply connectional: “A “congregation,” as used in this Form of Government, refers to a formally organized community chartered and recognized by a presbytery as provided in this Constitution. Each congregation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shall be governed by this Constitution. The members of a congregation put themselves under the leadership of the session and the higher councils (presbytery, synod, and General Assembly). The session is responsible to guide and govern the life of the congregation. The session leads the congregation in fulfilling its responsibilities for the service of all people, for the up building of the whole church, and for the glory of God.” G-1.0103

• As ordained teaching and ruling elders and deacons of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we have vowed to be governed by our denomination’s polity, to be subject to its discipline, and to work for the peace, unity, and purity of the church.

• The following principle has been an important part of our heritage: “That when any matter is determined by a major vote, every member shall either actively concur with or passively submit to such determination; or if his conscience permit him to do neither, he shall, after sufficient liberty modestly to reason and remonstrate, peaceably withdraw from our communion without attempting to make any schism.” G-2.0105 Note 1

• If their consciences permit neither, individual members with strong issues of
conscience may pursue peaceable separation which may include dismissal to another Reformed body.

• Through our Constitution and consistent with our belief that today’s congregation manifests Christ’s Church that came before us and will follow after us, we have agreed that civil corporations are formed by authority of the Book of Order and are subject to its provisions:

The corporation so formed, or the individual trustees, shall have the following powers: to receive, hold, encumber, manage, and transfer property, real or personal, for the congregation, provided that in buying, selling, and mortgaging real property, the trustees shall act only after the approval of the congregation, granted in a duly constituted meeting; to accept and execute deeds of title to such property; to hold and defend title to such property; to manage any permanent special funds for the furtherance of the purposes of the congregation, all subject to the authority of the session and under the provisions of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The powers and duties of the trustees shall not infringe upon the powers and duties of the session or the board of deacons. G-4.101

• Under the “trust clause” of our constitution, congregations hold property in trust for the denomination: All property held by or for a particular church, ... 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-4.0203

• Decisions as to use and disposition of church property come to the presbytery, which is a “steward” of the property held in trust by congregations. The presbytery cannot ignore its stewardship responsibilities with regard to such church property.

• Those who may feel called to separate from our denomination are nevertheless our brothers and sisters in Christ. Many have been faithful Presbyterians for years. They do not take this step lightly, but only after considerable prayer and exploration of alternatives.

• Within congregations with individuals who feel called to separate there may be persons who prefer to remain part of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The rights
and interests of such persons must be protected.

- If a desire to separate triggers a lengthy and acrimonious battle, both that congregation and our presbytery will be weakened and further distracted from responding to Christ’s call. Therefore, it is in the interests of the other congregations and ministries of the presbytery and of potentially separatist congregations to try to work things out peaceably, so that each may be freed to get on with the business of sharing the good news of the gospel.

- Any negotiated allocation of property will recognize the gifts and investments in ministry of generations preceding the current congregation, as well as the continuing needs of congregations and ministries continuing as the Presbytery of Wabash Valley and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

- In addition to allocating property, any departing congregation is expected to contribute a negotiated settlement in support of presbytery operations to relieve remaining congregations of sharp loss of programs of mutual support.

**OUTLINE OF PROCESS FOR ENGAGEMENT WITH PRESBYTERY**

**How We Will Work Together in Good Faith**

- All parties will be open and honest in their dealings with each other; will provide requested information and documents in a timely manner; and will protect the rights of those who desire to remain within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

- The Session will refrain from any unilateral changes in the way their assets are held or managed.

- The Presbytery will be prepared to take all appropriate actions to preserve property and exercise discipline where any party involved is unwilling to work in good faith.

**Initial Contact and Dialogue**

When the leadership of the presbytery becomes aware, either through formal session action or discussion, or through informal contacts with church leaders or members, that individuals within a congregation are in serious disagreement with the denomination to the extent of considering leaving the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Moderator of Presbytery Assembly will convene the leadership team to discern together if a Reconciliation Team is appropriate under the circumstances. The “leadership team” will include the officers of the Presbytery, the General Presbyter, and other elected moderators as needed. If the circumstances are appropriate for a Reconciliation Team, the Moderator of Presbytery will appoint at least 5 members, with a balance of elders and ministers, in consultation with other Presbytery officers and the General Presbyter. Should an Administrative Commission be required it is expected that this Reconciliation Team will be appointed to serve on that Administrative Commission.

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The Reconciliation Team will meet with the session and jointly or subsequently with the congregation. This process is meant to insure that the congregation is fully informed on the issues at hand, equipped with knowledge of our Presbytery's process, as well as the processes and values that have guided other congregations and presbyteries in their decision making. In doing so, the Presbytery hopes to creatively engage concerns and enable individuals to make decisions based on facts and not assumptions.

**Prayerful discussion of differences and determination of possibility of reconciliation**

The Reconciliation Team will attempt to “bridge the gap” with the congregation through discussion of possibilities for reconciliation and probable impacts when dismissal or division is the course decided upon. The Reconciliation Team will outline the process and likely consequences of the congregation requesting dismissal from the Presbytery, and will use the following principles to guide the Reconciliation Team’s dialogue with the church:

- To engage members of the congregation in a time of prayer and conversation aimed at understanding the issues of those who desire that their congregation be dismissed, and also to hear from those congregation members who wish to remain within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

- If the team determines that progress can be made toward reconciliation through continued and constructive dialogue, the team will establish a mutually agreeable timeline of talks to be held and proceed to engage in such dialogue.

- In its dialogue with the church session and congregation, the team will share implications for a church considering leaving the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The Reconciliation Team will discuss with all minister members the likely impacts on their benefits and ordination status of the various options available to them, so that they fully understand the implications of their transfer to another Reformed body, or staying as a member of Presbytery.

**Future Steps Together**

If after a period of dialogue, the Reconciliation Team and the congregation are not able to establish a process for remaining within the denomination, the Reconciliation Team in consultation with the leaders of the congregation will determine the most appropriate course of action which may include dismissal of the congregation to another Reformed denomination or the dissolution of a congregation when there are significant concerns about a community of faith continuing in that place.

In both of these instances the Reconciliation Team would in most cases be appointed as an Administrative Commission charged by the Assembly with the powers to facilitate these outcomes in partnership with the congregation. If it appears that the congregation is significantly divided regarding the question of dismissal the Presbytery will proceed as specified in G-4.0207, “Property of Church in Schism.”