

First Presbyterian Church of Dalton, Georgia

The concept of Joint Congregational Witness

Joint congregational witness is a mission strategy that will allow our local Presbyterian church to continue to function as a united faith community even as our people hold formal membership in two different denominations.

Motivation: In the knowledge that an important portion of our faith community desires to disassociate with the PCUSA and that an equally important portion may wish to remain in the denomination, and given the continuing blessings and mutual benefits to be enjoyed only as a unified body of believers, the session recommends to the congregation the following approach as being the most positive way

- to maintain the ties that bind us in love,
 - to openly reflect the theological diversity within our membership, and
 - to most effectively witness to the power of Christ to accomplish his great mission of reconciliation both among us and through us.
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Two denominations, one family of faith, and under one roof:

After months of listening and prayerful discernment, the session acknowledges that the spiritual integrity of our members can best be honored by providing them with alternatives in their denominational affiliation.

And after exploring the advantages of several Reformed bodies, we now recommend that our people be given the option of continuing their worship and work here as members of the **PCUSA** or of the new **Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians**, an exciting and more conservative sister denomination being formed out of the **PCUSA** for reasons that address our needs here.

Historically, Presbyterians have benefitted from a theological diversity that brought us all toward the center. We have been known as “people of the middle way”, a compliment to the wisdom that has so often emerged from our thoughtful considerations. But issues of sexuality upon which we have been forced to vote have highlighted other differences, differences that would now require unreasonable compromise by members of our local church. The obvious solution for us is to allow each current member to choose from these two options the denominational affiliation that best expresses one’s self identity ... and at the same time to remain members of our one church family, First Presbyterian Church, Dalton.

Q. I like our church the way it is. Why change?

There are many things to like about our church. We come here because we find

- * inspiration in worship
- * joy in fellowship
- * purpose in mission
- * stimulation in learning
- * growth in discipleship
- * strength in our heritage and for many other reasons.

But increasingly in recent years those of us who are more conservative have felt

- a loss of spiritual integrity because of denominational decisions and the statements of some in leadership positions. One essential reason to provide a new option is to allow each current member to belong to the denomination that best represents his or her public expression of faith.

A second reason to change is that we need to improve in the area of evangelism.

- Evangelism is a primary emphasis of the new Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (called ECO), and going forward our family of faith must be more effective in reaching out to our community and the world. Members who feel called to ECO will help us to improve in an area of our shared life that needs new energy and vision.

Q. Then why don't we all change to the new denomination?

We have come to realize that "one size no longer fits all" when it comes to denominations and our church family. To require membership in the ECO for everybody in our congregation would be to inflict on moderates the same compromise of spiritual integrity that conservatives now feel. No, the way forward for our church is to focus on what makes us so positive as a local family of faith and to allow each member to express her- or himself denominationally as each chooses.

Q. This sounds complicated. How would we make this work?

There will be a lot of work in the beginning, especially as we identify and organize some of our members into an ECO congregation. The new denomination has a checklist of steps to be taken to formally become a new church.

And while we go about the process of introducing a new congregation, we would also be working out the details – the many details – of being ... on paper ... two different congregations sharing in a common ministry and mission.

Please don't let this complexity concern you. Even though there is much paperwork to be done behind the scenes, **things at church will feel just as good as they always have, and eventually they will feel even better.**

Q. This is hard for me to picture. What would hold us together as one faith family of two denominations?

Great question! Let's start with a partial list of the things that hold us together now, local things in addition to our overarching faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. We share

Staff
Session
Worship
Friendship
Heritage
Programs
Facilities
Education
Missions
Budget and
much more

Theologically, we do have some diversity. Such diversity is often expressed along a continuum from

Liberal ----- to ----- Conservative

When we are asked individually to chose between the two denominations based on theology, biblical interpretation and other factors, session anticipates that we will ...

have a group
that tends
to be from the
center left

and

have a group
that tends
to be from the
center right

Now here's "the picture "you asked for. This is how we might think of ourselves.

The *butterfly* has long been a Christian symbol of the Resurrection, for it is wrapped in a cocoon and appears dead only to emerge far more beautiful and powerful than before. If we look at the elements above, the long list of things that unite us and the honest acknowledgement of our various places along the theological continuum either side of the center, then suddenly we realize that ...

	Staff	
	Session	
	Worship	
A group	Friendship	A group
	Heritage	
that tends	Programs	that tends
	Facilities	
to be from	Education	to be from
	Missions	
the center left	Budget	the center right
	and	
	much	
	more	

the butterfly is us!

And for centuries, the red in a rose has represented the blood of Jesus shed on the cross as a gift of love given to save and unite those who follow him. And the pink of the outer petals is the traditional color of joy in the Spirit. This icon of the butterfly drawing its strength from the rose can graphically express our renewed commitment to Christ as the center of our collective life as a church and our exciting emergence as a congregation with wings.

Jesus often drew upon examples from daily travels to help his earlier disciples understand important lessons of life. Using the butterfly and the rose in the same way, we are able to see more clearly the “organizational structure” of our “reformed” Church.

Here we are!

(ART work to be distributed at the session meeting)

Together, we can fly!

Q. I love the image of the butterfly, and I appreciate the session’s effort to keep us united as a church. But I see here two of everything. Would there be two sessions?

Yes, just as on paper there would be two congregations, there would be a session which represented the new ECO membership and one that continued to represent the PCUSA members. And these sessions would operate from two constitutions and answer to two different presbyteries.

All of this sounds complex, but we are convinced that this is the most faithful way for us to proceed because it keeps us together, it strengthens our witness as a church in our community, and it expands our evangelistic appeal.

As an example of how this will come to pass, let us demonstrate from the very recent presbytery meeting which our congregation hosted. In Cobb County, a typical white congregation and a Korean congregation found that sharing a facility was beneficial to both. They developed a covenant that set forth the arrangements under which they would operate, and they assembled a representative Joint Operations Council to coordinate all the activities. The two presbyteries, one Korean and our own Cherokee Presbytery, will oversee the covenant as proposed, and the two congregations will operate together.

Our arrangement will be much easier, for we envision that we would worship as we do now, all together. Mickey would continue to do most of the preaching. Tyler would continue to lead in congregational care. Jean, Wayne and all the staff would go on serving all the people, and together we would keep doing what churches do – and better in the area of evangelism.

First Baptist Church here in Dalton is a united congregation, but they offer two giving “tract” options because some of their members identify with the Southern Baptist Convention and others with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. And if other churches can thrive in this way, so can we.

Q. What if it doesn't work? Will we have an "exit strategy"?

As in a prenuptial agreement, we will research the legal aspects of ownership and have a clear understanding of where things stand “just in case.” Since two congregations will be sharing one facility, any agreement must include a statement on property if separation might occur at some time in the future. Further, Cherokee Presbytery will have to approve whatever we propose as a future contingency regarding the property, and the new ECO presbytery will have to agree to our understanding.

We envision that our plan for Joint Congregational Witness, which is the Book of Order's term for such an arrangement, will call for a minimum period of operation, perhaps three years, to allow every opportunity for things to be refined and, with God's help, for the results to be highly successful. At any point thereafter, either congregation may end the relationship with one year's notice of intent. At such a sad time, we would dutifully follow the plan of separation .

Q. When will we see more particulars? There are many details like the calling of a pastor or the disbursement of mission funds that are not yet spelled out. When may we expect all that session proposes?

Ours task is exciting as we seek the best for First Church, and we are fully aware that many details must be addressed.

This particular paper serves merely to introduce you to the concept of two congregations united in heart and purpose and still joyfully sharing a great staff and facility.

We invite you to consult the website (insert)to learn more about the new ECO denomination.

With anticipation of and appreciation for your prayers, we shall continue with great hope the work to which we have been called.

Your session

(List your names to encourage feedback)

