

From the Session at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Santa Barbara

Fri 12/28/2012 8:19 AM

Comment and Request for Clarification

Your email states that the listed 5 deletions and 1 addition are necessary because of the Synod Permanent Judicial Commission's (SPJC) Decision dated November 10, 2012 (copy attached). We appreciate your attention to revising the document to reflect the SPJC's Decision by removing all references to the Union Presbytery. The addition at Line 121 to add "and/or the Presbytery of Santa Barbara," seems to be a substantive not editorial) change and raises some questions and concerns, especially when considered in the context the entire paragraph, as follows:

In the Presbyterian tradition, an inter-connected relationship is assumed between the Presbytery and its congregations. Therefore, no congregation will be dismissed to another Reformed body unless and until, at a minimum, the following process is followed. A congregation can be dismissed with property to another Reformed body recognized by the Presbyterian Church (USA) and/or the Presbytery of Santa Barbara. It cannot be dismissed to "independency."

In our reading and understanding of the SPJC Decision, the addition of and/or the Presbytery of Santa Barbara is not addressed or required. The SPJC ruled that the requirements of ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO) "exist beyond the boundaries of what is understood to be Reformed." We question if this addition at line 121 intends to impart that the Presbytery of Santa Barbara may dismiss a congregation to a body that the Presbyterian Church (USA) deems not to be a Reformed body, if the Presbytery of Santa Barbara deems it to be so. Please provide clarification of the reasons for this addition and more information on the details of the process being proposed for the presbytery to follow for characterizing "another Reformed Body" to which a congregation can be dismissed. Does the Presbytery of Santa Barbara have a specific intent concerning the proposed addition with regard to ECO? How will the Presbytery of Santa Barbara operating in good order resolve potential differences with higher councils concerning the qualification of bodies as Reformed bodies?

While we are aware that some congregations have been in discussions with ECO and may be disappointed, full and open information will serve to more fully inform members of the presbytery and congregations considering dismissal from the PC(USA). It will also help advance the principles of consistency, pastoral responsibility, accountability, gracious witness, openness, and transparency in the dismissal process. Decisions of the permanent judicial commissions of synods and presbyteries are binding on the parties to the particular cases in which the decisions are rendered unless overturned on appeal. (Authoritative Interpretation approved by 217th General Assembly (2006, Item 05-27, Request 06-5)). Since the SPJC Decision in Remedial Case No. 2012-03 has not been overturned on appeal, the SPJC finding that ECO is not a Reformed body is binding on the Presbytery of Santa Barbara. Further, on November 18 a remedial complaint was filed with the Synod PJC (Anderson et al v. Presbytery of San Gabriel)

regarding an action by that Presbytery to dismiss two congregations with property to ECO. The remedial action is based in part on the alleged mischaracterization of ECO as a Reformed body. A stay has been issued by the SPJC in the Anderson case. The finding in the SPJC decision on our case, as well as the pending Anderson case and stay, currently weigh strongly against any decision by the Presbytery of Santa Barbara to dismiss congregations to ECO.

Presbytery Response Team

The draft policy includes a description of the process for the formation of a Presbytery Response Team. Two of our Session members, Brett Becker and Sandy Thoits, participated with the committee that prepared the proposed Gracious Dismissal Policy (the draft emailed on October 25 and distributed at the October 30 presbytery meeting.) Since then, we have heard that at least 3 churches through their sessions have requested to begin the dismissal process to be dismissed from the PC(USA), with an indication that additional congregations may follow. Given that the process will be ongoing with multiple PRT's in place at the same time with several churches each with a unique situation, there will be a need for many teaching and ruling elder volunteers to serve on PRTs.

Even if some churches are dismissed from the Presbytery and the PC(USA), other churches, such as St. Andrew's, will remain as part of the future life mission of the Presbytery. Leaders and new volunteers will be needed more than ever from the churches remaining. We expect that there will be challenges and tough roads ahead which will involve the time and energy of dedicated people from all of our diverse congregations.

In order to offer a practical process for setting up multiple PRT's and to reflect the need for inclusion, we suggest that the procedure for appointing the members of the PRT's be modified to provide for the formation of a balanced standing team of teaching/ruling elders who are available to serve on PRT's. This type of structure is in place in other presbyteries, as described in the Presbytery of San Francisco Dismissal Policy (attached to this email), as follows:

Identification of Potential Engagement Team Members

The Leadership Council of our Presbytery in consultation with the Committee on Ministry are expected to identify a group of teaching and ruling elders who possess excellent pastoral and listening skills, including those with special training or experience in mediation and negotiation. The goal is that this group will constitute a standing team of members who are available to serve on engagement teams so that the Presbytery shall always be ready to respond immediately to a congregation that has expressed concerns that might lead to a request for dismissal. The composition of this standing team, and its tenure, are to be determined by the Leadership Council, but it is essential that the team be balanced, reflecting the diverse views of those in our Presbytery.

We suggest and request that similar provisions be incorporated in the draft Policy, page 3, in the section titled "The Session and the Presbytery Response Team."

Financial Guidelines

The revised draft Policy states that the financial guidelines are still being prepared. When will the guidelines be available for review? We are aware of the recent GAPJC decision (Tom v. Presbytery of San Francisco) and a FAQ on Gracious Dismissal Policies from the PC(USA) that describe the fiduciary duties of the presbytery, including consideration of a church's financial position and valuation of property and the PC(USA)'s use and benefit of the property. http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/oga/pdf/faq_gracious_dismissal_policies_after_tom_v_doc_final_version.pdf

We believe that Financial Guidelines are critical and helpful information to provide to the members of the Presbytery and elder commissioners well before the February 9 meeting and vote. Given the importance and complexity of the issues, and with the February 9 vote coming up soon, we would appreciate your forwarding to us the draft financial guidelines, as well as a response to our above comments and requests, as soon as possible so that we have sufficient time to for review and discernment prior to the vote.

We appreciate your review and consideration of these matters. We recognize that the Presbytery of Santa Barbara is comprised of people with very diverse opinions and positions, and that working cooperatively on a dismissal policy and process involves difficult discussions. As we seek inclusion and contribution in this process, we remain committed to listening and respecting everyone throughout the entire process. We believe that through the Holy Spirit we can, and hopefully will, grow in respect for and learn from all of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Yours in Christ's Service,

St. Andrew's Session
Sandy Thoits, Clerk of Session