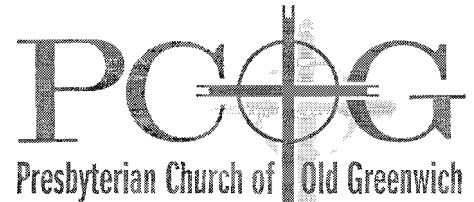




Denominational Issues

Questions & Answers

Love God
Serve Jesus
Love One Another



PCOG exists to help you know Jesus Christ, find God's call for your life and live it.

January 15, 2010

Dear PCOG Members and Friends,

Status Report – Denominational Issues

Over the last three months, we have received a large number of responses (approaching 50% of active membership) expressing viewpoints about PCOG's denominational relationship within the Presbyterian Church (USA). Without exception, every viewpoint can be characterized as either urging or supporting the initiation of discussions with our Presbytery about separation from the denomination.

During this period, a number of questions were raised. So that everyone will know the questions asked, and the answers provided, we prepared a *Question & Answer* document, which accompanies this report. We ask that you please read this document. In so doing, if additional questions arise or if clarification is needed please call the church office (203-637-3669) or send an email to office@pcogonline.org to the attention of the Denominational Issues Team. We will update and supplement the Q & A document as required.

Separately, THE ROAD TO DECISION an 8-week *Prayer Guide* has been prepared by various congregants, which will serve to call us all to pray about our denominational relationship and the process ahead of us.

At the *Annual Meeting* of the congregation, we will provide more information about our next steps and your role in it. The meeting will be held on Friday, January 29th 7:00 pm at PCOG. Please plan to attend. And remember the we have a Chili Cook-Off that night as well!

Walter Baker
for Denominational Issues Team



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Questions & Answers Relating to PCOG relationship to PCUSA *

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Please contact the *Denominational Issues Team* at office@pcogonline.org for further information or if there are additional questions.

* This booklet has been prepared as a response to questions raised by congregants.

Q 1 -- What is the rationale for gracious separation?

As a member church of the *Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, we are in a **voluntary covenanted relationship** with one another and with God through Jesus Christ.

The Bible, the historic witness of the Confessions of the Church and our form of Government hold the covenants that create our denominational faith and life. We write this rationale as a response to actions by denominational entities, governing bodies of Presbyteries and churches, ordained officers, individual members and advocacy associations which breach or ceaselessly challenge the covenants of our relationship as we understand them.

Jesus Christ

Jesus said -- *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."* (John 14:6)

PCOG's "*Statement of Faith Values*"¹ states the following about the person Jesus Christ:

We worship Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord believing Him to be fully divine and fully human, of the same essence of God".

We believe that Jesus has total and exclusive redemptive power to transform and sustain new life and is the only provision for salvation."

In contrast, a 2008 survey, conducted within our denomination, by *Presbyterian Panel of Characteristics of Presbyterians*, reveals a shocking statistic. Under the category *Dimensions of Belief*, the survey states that only 35% of pastors and 22% of specialized clergy "*strongly agree*" or "*agree*" that "*only followers of Jesus can be saved.*"

The PCUSA website² states the following under the caption "*What Presbyterians Believe -- Jesus is the Way*":

"To declare that everyone will make it in the end is to make the same theological error as to decide that only those who profess Christ in ways we understand will be present in the Kingdom. It is to forget the sovereignty of God, to lose our focus on Christ."

Jesus said -- "*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.*" (John 14:6) Those words of Jesus are both debated and even denied in denominational settings (our elders have experienced this at Presbytery and it is confirmed by the *Presbyterian Panel Survey* cited above.)

¹ PCOG *Statement of Values* can be found at www.pcogonline.org The *Statement* was used when PCOG became a part of the *Confessing Church* advocacy movement.

² www.pcusa.org/today

We can no longer trust our denomination to preach that Jesus is THE way of salvation.

- Acts 4:12 "Salvation is found in no one else [Jesus], for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."
- John 14:6 above
- 1 Timothy 2:5 "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,"

Can we remain in a covenantal relationship in our denomination, through Jesus Christ, when we proclaim different Gospel messages?

Holy Scripture

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. (2 Timothy 3:16 – 4:5)

PCOG's "Statement of Faith Values" states the following about the Word of God: "We believe that the Bible is the infallible Word of God, inspired and preserved by the Holy Spirit, and our authority for obedience in faith and life."³

A contrasting statement about the denominational view of Scripture appears on the PC(USA) website,⁴ under "What Presbyterians Believe." It states: "For some the Bible is inerrant [part 1]; for others it is not necessarily factual, but it breathes with the life of God [part 2]."

A quote from Eugene Peterson represents our biblical viewpoint as well as "part 1" above of the denominational view: *the Bible, all of it, is livable; it is the text for living our lives... we are given this book so that we can imaginatively and believingly enter the world of the text and follow Jesus.*"

In contrast, we believe the following illustrates how others would restate Peterson's quote: *the Bible breathes the life of God in some places ... in other places it is useful as a reference ... but it may or may not be relevant to our modern culture and understanding.*

³ Other references -- Hebrews 4:12ff and Confessions (e.g. Westminster at C6.001ff).

⁴ See www.pcusa.org website

We can no longer trust our denomination to say the Bible is fully inspired by God the Holy Spirit to lead people to a saving knowledge of God and to help them understand their world rightly. By its very nature the Bible is infallible.

Can we remain in a covenantal relationship in our denomination, through Jesus Christ, when we hold significant disagreements on biblical interpretation and its role in faith and life?

Lordship of Jesus (i.e. faith & manner of life)

"Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? I will show you what he is like who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice. He is like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built. But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete."

(Luke 6: 46 – 49)

Our faith and manner of life (i.e. behavior) are inseparably linked. Our manner of life is a window into our faith.

Over the past two decades, PCOG has authored numerous documents written to express our faith-based identity in order to set us apart from denominational actions, reports, studies and statements.⁵ While the PCUSA Constitution continues to reflect our faith-based values for the most part, actions by advocacy associations, Permanent Judicial Commission rulings and overtures enacted by Presbyteries generate ceaseless efforts to rewrite the covenants of our relationship in ways that we hold contrary to biblical authority.

We can no longer trust fellow members and denominational entities to uphold the letter and intent of our Constitution, particularly in behavioral matters. And we no longer trust that agencies that seek change do so under biblical prescriptions. We are weary of the constant onslaught by, and the distractions of standing firm against, those who desire to alter the covenants in our relationship by introducing practices that are not biblically permitted.

Can we remain in a covenantal relationship in our denomination, through Jesus Christ, when we cannot agree on the things that Jesus requires of us in our manner of life?

⁵ See PCOG website for documents – www.pcogonline.org

Closing Statement

Know Jesus Christ, find His call for your life and live it. ⁶

Is God *calling* us to separate graciously? Have we prayed, listened to God's voice in scripture and counseled one another?

Our *Watchman's Duty* (Ezekiel 33: 1-9) has been fulfilled. The responsibility to act now lies with those who have *heard* the words of the *Watchman*.

The Scriptures warn about being "*double minded*" (James 4: 4-8) and about letting our "*yes be yes and no be no*" (Matthew 5:37). Listen to the words of the prophet Isaiah: "*Woe to those who call evil good and good evil; who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and clever in their own sight.*" (Isaiah 5:20-21).

Denominational differences are profound. They are the result of deeply held beliefs and unwavering convictions. Our members have long been active participants locally and nationally in expressing PCOG's *faith-based values* including participation in prayer. Our differences are barriers to shared worship, prayer and service. Denominational membership has ceased to identify "*what PCOG believes*" and "*what we resolve to do.*"

How can we remain as *faithful* members in our denomination "in agreement" and in a relationship based on *mutual trust under the Word of God*?

Have our *faith-based* differences already separated us from PCUSA? If so, the next step is to complete the *Discerning the Way* process with our Presbytery for the purpose of discerning whether it is God's Will to grant "dismissal" ... graciously and in a way that honors Jesus Christ.

⁶ PCOG Mission Statement

Q2 – If PCOG Separates from PCUSA where does it go?

There are several questions that have to be considered in responding to that question:

- ✓What are the constraints on the Presbytery in granting dismissal?
- ✓Is there a denominational home that shares PCOG's *essential & reformed* faith-based values?
- ✓What are the *positives* and *negatives* of joining another denomination?
- ✓What is the profile of the EPC?
- ✓What are the "Essentials" of faith of EPC? [See Attachment A]

What are the *denominational* constraints on the Presbytery in granting dismissal?

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*" PCOG's membership in PCUSA. *Dissolution* will give rise to litigation over the ownership of church property under the oversight of the *Office of the General Assembly*. [Another Q & A will address the property ownership issue.]

"*Reformed*" denominations to which a church may be dismissed are members of the "*World Alliance of Reformed Churches*" (a/k/a WARC). In the United States, the following denominations are on the list –

- Evangelical Presbyterian Church [discussed below]
- Hungarian Reformed Church in America
- Reformed Church in America [does not permit ordination of women]
- Korea Presbyterian Church in America
- United Church of Christ [Congregational Church – same issues as PCUSA]
- Lithuanian Evangelical Reformed Church
- **Presbyterian Church (USA)** [our present denominational home]
- Christian Reformed Church in North America [1 church in CT. 50% ordain women]
- Cumberland Presbyterian Church [Concentrated in KY and TN]
- Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America [Concentrated in a few southern states]

Is there a denominational home that shares PCOG's essentials & reformed faith-based values?

Having explored these options, we believe the Evangelical Presbyterian Church provides the best future. We find ourselves kindred spirits with the EPC for a number of reasons.

- Nearly all of the churches that have departed from PCUSA have found their new denominational home with the EPC.
- We agree with the Constitution of EPC, their statements of Essential Tenants of Faith,¹ Pastoral Letters and Position Papers.

For more information on EPC, we encourage you to visit their web site -- www.epc.org.

What are the Positives & Negatives of Membership in EPC?

Positives

- The EPC is a kindred spirit theologically; instead of battling regularly with our denomination we will be in a biblically faithful place with support as we seek to follow Jesus Christ – full time.
- Accountability to likeminded believers and structures.
- Mutual Support through ministry networks
- Fellowship Opportunity built on Scripture and Jesus.
- Focused on Mission and Ministry without denominational distractions
- Opportunity for church growth

Negatives

- No negatives have surfaced during our due diligence work. There is one area of difference that we feel is important to note. The EPC allows local churches to decide whether women are eligible for ordination. The EPC website provides the following comment:

"While this is a topic about which many Christians feel strongly, the EPC believes that there can be genuine unity amid diversity on the subject. Each congregation has the right to decide whether to have women officers. The local congregation, subject to presbytery approval, determines whether they will have women as pastors. We believe that, whatever a congregation's view of office, women should be encouraged to serve as God has called and gifted them."

A Note from Pastor Gestal

Although no denomination is perfect (if it were I would ruin it when I joined it :©), I am glad that we would seek dismissal to another denomination. I believe strongly that accountability of denominations is a

¹ See Attachment A for EPC brief statement of Essentials of Faith

good thing providing, of course, that the denomination is committed to the Scriptures as God's revealed and infallible Word and Jesus as God's announced way of salvation.

Given this, I am comfortable with the elders' choice that should we depart the PCUSA we would align with the EPC. Theologically the EPC lives where we live and we would no longer have to expend considerable energy defending our biblical theology. Instead, we would be supported and encouraged to follow Jesus as revealed in Scripture.

What is the profile of the EPC?

The following information comes from the EPC website --

"The EPC consists of approximately 230 churches representing approximately 80,000 members.

EPC is unique among American Presbyterians with a self-conscious attempt to balance essential and non-essential matters within a confessional heritage. EPC is unified in its commitment to the essentials of the historic Christian faith taught in the Bible, but allow liberty of conscience on those matters which are not so plain in or central to the Bible's teaching

Since the beginning EPC has felt that it represented a unique move of God. EPC has been blessed with a fervent beginning, a warm spirit and an uncommon oneness of heart. While the EPC has grown through the transfer of many existing churches, it has a deep desire to see the kingdom of God extended through energetic church planting and evangelism. The Vision 21 strategic plan through the year 2010 sets ambitious objectives for doing so. Growth has varied over the years, but has always been positive. We expect intense efforts in church planting to breed a church planting mentality that will produce significant growth in the next decade."

The Constitution of EPC and various position papers can be found on their website at www.epc.org

THE ESSENTIALS

All Scripture is self-attesting and being Truth, requires our unreserved submission in all areas of life. The infallible Word of God, the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments, is a complete and unified witness to God's redemptive acts culminating in the incarnation of the Living Word, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible, uniquely and fully inspired by the Holy Spirit, is the supreme and final authority on all matters on which it speaks. On this sure foundation we affirm these additional essentials of our faith.

1. We believe in one God, the sovereign Creator and Sustainer of all things, infinitely perfect and eternally existing in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To Him be all honor, glory and praise forever!
2. Jesus Christ, the living Word, became flesh through His miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit and His virgin birth. He who is true God became true man united in one Person forever. He died on the cross a sacrifice for our sins according to the Scriptures. On the third day He arose bodily from the dead, ascended into heaven where, at the right hand of the Majesty on High, He now is our High Priest and Mediator.
3. The Holy Spirit has come to glorify Christ and to apply the saving work of Christ to our hearts. He convicts us of sin and draws us to the Savior, indwelling our hearts. He gives new life to us, empowers and imparts gifts to us for service. He instructs and guides us into all truth, and seals us for the day of redemption.
4. Being estranged from God and condemned by our sinfulness, our salvation is wholly dependent upon the work of God's free grace. God credits His righteousness to

those who put their faith in Christ alone for their salvation, and thereby justifies them in His sight. Only such as are born of the Holy Spirit and receive Jesus Christ become children of God and heirs of eternal life.

5. The true Church is composed of all persons who through saving faith in Jesus Christ and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit are united together in the body of Christ. The Church finds her visible yet imperfect, expression in local congregations where the Word of God is preached in its purity and the sacraments are administered in their integrity, where scriptural discipline is practiced, and where loving fellowship is maintained. For her perfecting she awaits the return of her Lord.
6. Jesus Christ will come again to the earth personally, visibly, and bodily—to judge the living and the dead, and to consummate history and the eternal plan of God. "Even so, come, Lord Jesus." (Rev. 22:20)
7. The Lord Jesus Christ commands all believers to proclaim the gospel throughout the world and to make disciples of all nations. Obedience to the Great Commission requires total commitment to "Him who loved us and gave Himself for us." He calls us to a life of self-denying love and service. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." (Eph. 2:10)

The Essentials are set forth in greater detail in the Westminster Confession of Faith.

*In Essentials ...Unity
In Non-Essentials ... Liberty
In All Things ... Charity*

*Evangelical Presbyterian Church ♦ 17197 N. Laurel Park Drive Ste 567
Livonia, MI 48152-7912*

Q3 – What Is The Process for Requesting Gracious Separation?

STEP #1

A meeting of the Congregation will be called to vote “**yes**” or “**no**” on a motion similar to the following: ***Does the Congregation of PCOG authorize Session to request the Presbytery to form a “Review Team” for the purpose of seeking a mutual understanding of God’s Will for the relationship between PCOG and PCUSA.*** Prior to the meeting, the congregation will be provided with a *rationale* for the motion and will be given the opportunity to discuss and raise questions about it.

STEP #2

If the motion is approved then PCOG and representatives of PSNE will engage in a process described in a document entitled ***Discerning the Way***. The full document can be located at www.psne.org under the “publications” tab.

The process with the PSNE review team will include the following steps ¹ –

- Study and assess the “situation” in the congregation. (note – Presbytery has a constitutionally prescribed pastoral and oversight role to ensure that the interests of the “minority” are protected and to correct misrepresentations and errors)
- Engage the congregation and session in discussions to clarify issues of concern of both the congregation and the presbytery, with particular attention on the following:
 - The call of God to church unity;
 - The value of being a PCUSA congregation;
 - Constitutional processes;
 - Exercise of mutual discernment disciplines and
 - The guidance of Holy Scripture and Holy Spirit
- Recommend the next steps mutually discerned and developed by the Review Team and PCOG.

Step 2 could take several months depending upon the scope of the review by the presbytery team

STEP #3

If there is mutual agreement on *gracious separation*, the presbytery will form an *Implementation Group* to establish the terms of dismissal with representatives of the Church. One of the principles that should guide the terms of dismissal is that the ministry of the church should not be harmed and the financial loss to the Presbytery (e.g. per capita) should not be sudden.

¹ The “process” steps are excerpts from the *Discerning the Way* document page 4

The *marks* of separating *graciously* include the following –

- The process and behavior must bear the character of Jesus Christ and give honor to Him above all else.
- The result of the process must be consistent with the character and intentions of God as revealed in Scripture.
- Transparent and truthful in all dealings with one another.
- Information requests are fulfilled in a cooperative and timely manner.
- Agreement to protect the rights and interest of those who do not desire to separate.
- No unauthorized or unilateral changes in the way assets are held or managed while the process is on-going..
- No legal proceedings are initiated by either party.

STEP #4

If agreement is reached on terms of dismissal, the representatives of the *reformed denomination* in which PCOG would apply for membership will be contacted. The process for membership will then commence.

As mentioned above with the Simsbury Congregation the process took about 18 months to complete. We would hope that the timeline can be streamlined somewhat since a roadmap for the process has been provided by the previous Simsbury dismissal.

Q4 – What is the Issue Over Ownership of Church Property?

The Problem

The Constitution of PCUSA has a provision which states that all church property is held in trust for the use and benefit of PCUSA. This claim is made irrespective of how legal title is held. This provision was written into the Constitution in 1983 when the PCUS and UPCUSA denominations merged to become PCUSA. Because of this provision, PCUSA will defend its presumed claim of ownership of church property in state courts when congregations leave the denomination without their Presbytery having dismissed them with their property. Each Presbytery has the Constitutional power to *dismiss* congregations into the care and membership of another *reformed* denomination with their property. And it is this dismissal that we would seek, should we discern it is time for us to leave the PCUSA.

PCOG's Approach

PCOG would engage the Presbytery in the *Discerning the Way* process ¹ in order to seek dismissal with church property. The Covenant Presbyterian Church, Simsbury, CT invoked this process when they sought dismissal from PCUSA. While it took about 18 month to complete the process, Covenant PC was dismissed with its property. ²

Were the *Discerning the Way* process to fail, and if PCOG were drawn into litigation, we believe that the PCUSA property claim would be defeated under Connecticut statutes through application of “*neutral principles*” of ownership of church property. The “*facts*” and “*history*” about our church property stand us well in a judicial action, but there is always risk in litigation.

Why is the “Property” an Important Biblical Issue ³

Think of PCOG as a “*lighthouse*” standing in a place from which Jesus Christ can be proclaimed, known, worshipped and where good works in His name can happen. Then think about the consequences were ownership abandoned to PCUSA.

Litigation is a last resort option and would only be undertaken if there is discernment that rulers, powers, worldly and spiritual forces have found their way into the *Discerning the Way* process.

¹ The *Discerning the Way* process is discussed in Q3

² Covenant PC is the first and only church as of 12/09 in our Presbytery to enter into the *Discerning the Way* process. Hopefully, the time period required to complete the process can be shortened.

³ Under the EPC Constitution, each local church is the clear owner of their respective properties.

Q5 – How Does Separation from PCUSA Affect Pastor Gestal’s Medical & Retirement Benefits?

PCUSA Benefit Plans

The Board of Pension of PCUSA and our Presbytery **require** Pastor Bill to participate in plans that cover Health/ Dental care, Retirement and Death/Disability. In 2009, the cost for each plan was –

<input type="checkbox"/> Medical & Dental – Insurance.....	\$17,500
<input type="checkbox"/> Life Insurance/Disability.....	<u>900</u>
✍ Total Medical – PCUSA.....	18,400*
<input type="checkbox"/> Pension -- defined benefit plan.....	<u>9,400</u>
✍ Total Cost – Board of Pension	27,800
<input type="checkbox"/> Minimum Co-pay reimbursement (PSNE)	<u>2,000</u>
✍ Total Cost	<u>29,800</u>

* Medical premiums are based on a percentage of compensation..

Retirement Plan

Were PCOG to join another denomination, the effect on Pastor Gestal’s retirement benefit at age 65 would be the following:

- 1 Pastor Gestal is vested in the PCUSA plan. At the date of dismissal from PCUSA his accrued benefit would be “frozen.” It would be payable to him at the date of his retirement.
- 2 From the date of dismissal until retirement, PCOG would make contributions into a 403b Plan (like a 401k but for pastors).¹
- 3 Annual contributions to a 403b plan by PCOG in the amount of \$10,500, which earns income at an annual rate of 5%, will yield a balance that brings Pastor Gestal’s retirement benefit to substantially the same level as if he had remained in the PCUSA -- i.e. vested benefits from PCUSA plus withdrawals from a 403b plan = substantially the same retirement payments that would be received from PCUSA.




The PCUSA plan is a “defined benefit” plan whereas the 403b Plan is a “defined contribution plan.” Each plan has different *opportunities*, *risks* and *responsibilities*. We believe that Pastor Gestal understands these differences.

¹ EPC denomination sponsors a 403b plan managed by Fidelity.

Medical & Dental

The health plan offered by EPC is a conventional PPO program administered by *Highmark Blue Cross/Blue Shield*. Drug prescriptions are administered through *Express-Scripts*. PCUSA plans are also administered by the same companies. Thus the medical and dental plans are essentially the same

The annual cost of the EPC plan for 2010 for substantially the same level of coverage as provided by PCUSA is as follows --

<input type="checkbox"/> Basic Plan – 80 – 20%.....	\$13,000*
<input type="checkbox"/> Dental (estimate).....	900
<input type="checkbox"/> Life Insurance (\$50,000).....	180
<input type="checkbox"/> Disability.....	<u>490</u>
 Total Cost – EPC.....	14,570
 Total Medical – PCUSA.....	<u>18,400</u>
 Lower annual EPC cost.....	<u>\$3,830</u>

* Medical premiums are based on a fixed premium per month.

Statement by Pastor Gestal

Obviously one important issue for me and my family revolves around retirement. Having reviewed the numbers with the elders I feel comfortable that the retirement benefits of the PCUSA and EPC are comparable. The biggest change for me is the move from a defined benefit plan to a defined contribution plan; I will need some help navigating and managing investment options since I have never had to do that before. Beyond that I am comfortable making the switch if that is where the Lord leads us.