



Season of Discernment FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) April 2013

The following questions were raised during the Town Hall Meetings and the Small Groups informational events, provided from input at Staff Meetings and discussions by the Session, and asked by individuals directly addressing the Discernment Work Party (DWP) members.

These questions come in response to information presented concerning the ways in which the PC(USA) has moved in recent decades from past positions on theological tenets and social issues. The former relate to perspectives on the inerrancy/infallibility of scripture and its rule in matters of faith and life, the divinity of Jesus and his Lordship, the resurrection of Jesus, the uniqueness of Jesus' atoning death. The latter relates to the shifts in views on abortion, ordination of sexually-active homosexuals, and same-sex marriage.

Questions Related to Theological Issues

1) What are GSPC's "boundaries" (a reference to Pastor Paul White's presentation citing the theological spectrum within PC(USA) and how on key issues some perspectives and decisions have gone beyond the "boundaries" of appropriateness.

Like any church, Good Shepherd includes people who hold a range of theological understanding and personal opinions. However, at our core, a majority hold to more traditional Reformed theological views. Some of our boundaries include holding that the Bible is a true, trustworthy revelation of what God wants us to know about matters of faith and life and is our authority or rule for such matters. The prevalent theological understanding of Jesus is that he is fully human and fully divine - he is the Son who, with the Father and Holy Spirit, eternally exists in the One God the Bible reveals. God's reconciling act of redemption is centered in Jesus whose death provides for our forgiveness and oneness with God, and whose bodily resurrection assures us of everlasting life and victory over all the enemies of the Kingdom of God. On the issues related to homosexuality and abortion there is diversity of opinion. However, most would agree that when we look to the Bible we find God's intention for marriage and see God's value for and the sanctity of human life affirmed.

2) Our Elders, Deacons, and Pastors make a vow that they "sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith..." What are those Essential Tenets?

The Book of Order says the essential tenets of the Reformed Faith are "...expressed in the confessions of our church..." Our Book of Confessions includes a number of confessions or statements of faith from which the "essential tenets" can be drawn. Unfortunately there is no simple way of drawing a set of essential theological tenets from all those hundreds of statements. The result has been confusion and lack of clarity about what the essential tenets are. Some ordaining bodies (churches and presbyteries) have attempted to describe eight essential tenets as a means of stating what they believe and what they

are asking Elders, Deacons and Pastors to affirm. A recent General Assembly Judicial Commission ruling has found one such action to be unconstitutional since it restricts the exercise of one's freedom of conscience. Our denomination lacks clarity about central beliefs, has become a non-connectional church (different beliefs in different churches), and asks officers to make a vow that is unclear and confusing.

3) Are their "official" PC(USA) positions regarding theology? Has the PC(USA) failed to define the "boundaries on theological essentials?"

There are statements on theological issues and social issues. Some of these statements can be found on the www.gspc.org website, for example Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ or Presbyterian Use of Scripture. You can also find these at the Presbytery website at the "Discern" link at www.losranchos.org and at <http://blog.losranchos.org> Such statements have been produced in response to various issues, controversies, or commissioned by a General Assembly. However, the "official" theological position is nowhere clearly defined other than the reference to the Book of Confessions. Again, the result is a wide-range of theological viewpoints and a lack of a unified theological understanding that would strengthen the unity of the denomination.

4) How comfortable are we with being a part of this broad spectrum of belief?

One of the reasons we have entered into this Season of Discernment is our disagreement with and disapproval of recent General Assembly actions related to ordination standards, positions on the Deity of Jesus, and the shift by the PC(USA) away from a Biblically based body to a secular progressive organization. We currently are part of a church that is a "house divided" on many such issues. We find ourselves often being identified with decisions and perspectives with which we disagree and which impact our focus upon making disciples. While it is possible to be part of this broad spectrum the negative impact has been time and energy spent on controversial issues, a diluted focus on evangelism and making disciples as priorities of the denomination, and fostering apathy toward the denomination, distrust and division. These raise the question whether this is the best environment for us to remain in.

5) If we stay in PC(USA) to what extent will we be allowed to define, express and practice our own beliefs as a church?

This is difficult to say. When the PC(USA) adopted an egalitarian view of women in ministry and began to ordain women to Pastoral ministries, it soon became a requirement that all congregations shall ordain women officers. It is conceivable that in the future congregations will be required to "toe the line" and ordain homosexual persons who are not celibate or are in same-sex marriages.

6) Where does our Presbytery stand on these issues?

The Presbytery of Los Ranchos is made up of Teaching Elders (Pastors) and Ruling Elder commissioners. Good Shepherd has four Ruling Elder Commissioners and three Teaching Elders and others who are members of Presbytery. Members of Presbytery serve on its Council, Strategic Coordinating Team, Committee on Ministry (overseeing churches), Committee on Preparation for Ministry, and other committees. There is also a Presbytery staff. So, to answer this question, there is no official statement or position of the Presbytery because it is made up of people from all the 58 churches within it. The Presbytery of Los Ranchos is unique in that the majority of churches are more conservative. So, there is a spectrum of theological and social beliefs, but the more conservative positions are the majority.

7) Are PC(USA) Seminaries becoming more progressive/liberal?

The simple answer is "yes." One finds a full spectrum of theological and social viewpoints within our denomination's seminaries. Generally speaking, these schools promote a more progressive position on theology, scripture, the person of Jesus, and on social issues. Like secular universities, there has been a pronounced shift to a more secular progressive position.

8) Is Good Shepherd becoming more liberal?

The simple answer is "No." The pastors and Ruling Elders have differing perspectives on theology and the issues as well. We are not widely apart, however, and even with the differences, we have a unity of belief on the essential and foundational doctrines regarding scripture, Jesus' divinity, the resurrection, and others. We are conservative in these matters and liberal in holding forth the grace of Jesus Christ.

9) Why have the churches with a more conservative point of view allowed these liberal ideas to take over?

Theological and social shifts do not occur suddenly but unfold over time. Our denomination's form of government allows people to present positions and advocate for change repeatedly. If something fails to be approved at one General Assembly, it is back again at the next, and the next, etc. The percentage of more liberal people who participate in the General Assembly process is higher than the more conservative (reflecting the makeup of the church nationwide and the aggressiveness of those who are more "activist" about liberal causes).

10) What is the process of churches defining the "Essential Tenets?"

As we continue through a Season of Discernment we will be dealing with foundational theological tenets in a series of sermons on the "Solas" of Reformed Theology. These are the pillars of our faith - Sola Scriptura (Scripture Alone), Sola Fide (faith Alone), Sola Gratia (Grace Alone), Sola Christus (Christ Alone). The Foundations Class is dealing with the essentials of Reformed Theology in this current semester. We will post the Good Shepherd Vision Statement that cites our foundational beliefs and values. The Session will be evaluating a document based upon the Westminster Confession of Faith that clearly describes eight essential tenets with the intent of adopting it as our statement.

Questions Related to Social Issues

1) Are their "official" PC(USA) positions regarding homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and abortion?

There are Authoritative Interpretations (statements of understanding) related to homosexuality published by our denomination. In July 2011, Amendment 10-A was ratified which changed ordination standards (allowing for ordination of homosexuals). With it came the elimination of all previous Authoritative Interpretations and studies related to homosexuality. There are position statements on abortion, and currently churches are being asked to study both the Majority and Minority Reports on Civil Unions and Same-Sex Marriage that came out of the General Assembly in 2010. These are available at the [http://www.PC\(USA\).org/resource](http://www.PC(USA).org/resource) website.

2) Why do we see such a high majority of pastors who favor same-sex marriage?

This came from the presentation that included percentages of members, elders, and pastors in our denomination who support same-sex marriage. Among the ordained ministers in the denomination is a significant number of ministers who serve in "validated ministries." These include things like hospital chaplaincy, campus pastors, social-services type roles, inter-faith relations, political activism, and others.

When surveyed, these pastors in validated ministries generally identify as liberals on social issues. In contrast, pastors in parish ministries tend to be more moderate and conservative.

3) Are homosexuals welcome at GS?

The answer is "absolutely!" We are called to love our neighbor and not condemn. We are to be compelled with Christ-like love for any- and everyone who comes to Good Shepherd.

4) Can a homosexual person be a member, an elder or deacon, a pastor?

*Yes to all of those. However, as an ordaining body, our Session holds that homosexual sexual behavior is inconsistent with Biblical teaching. To honor Jesus Christ as Lord over our sexuality means being faithful in marriage or celibate outside of marriage. The key here is behavior. Were a homosexual to be celibate they would meet the test to serve as elder or deacon. The larger question deals with **any** unrepentant sinful behavior, and is not just limited to sexuality. an unrepentant spousal abuser, for example, would similarly be unqualified to serve as an elder or deacon.*

5) What do the Pastors believe about homosexuality and same-sex marriage?

The pastors of Good Shepherd believe that human sexuality is a great gift given in God's grace not only for "being fruitful and multiplying" but also for developing a strong bond of intimacy and the enjoyment of pleasure between a man and a woman. We also take seriously the Biblical description of "the Fall" in which sin impacts everything including causing confusion regarding sex. That's why the pastors agree the gospel is good news as it asserts that God is able to transform the brokenness, confusion, disorientation, and alienation we experience in this fallen world. We agree that to honor Jesus Christ as Lord over our sexuality means being faithful in a marriage between a man and a woman or celibate outside of marriage.

6) What do the Pastors believe about abortion?

The pastors agree that the Bible presents a high view of human life. God calls humans into being "in the likeness of God" with moral consciousness, volition to choose and act, the capacity to know and relate to God, intellect and creativity that no other creature has, and the capacity to be indwelt by God's Holy Spirit. We believe that life begins at conception and aborting an unborn child is contrary to God's will in that it kills that unborn person and ends the possibility of that human life to form. While believing these things we extend the loving kindness of Jesus to women who have experienced an abortion or are considering one.

7) What do the Ruling Elders on Session believe about homosexuality and same-sex marriage?

*The Ruling Elders on Session have been asked to state what they believe about homosexuality and same-sex marriage. The majority of our 14 current Ruling Elders cited their total concurrence with the statements of the pastors in item 4 above. Two Ruling Elders offered different input. One disagreed with the definition of marriage being between a man and woman **only**. Another agreed with the statement but cited that many homosexual unions have been very loving and stable.*

8) What do the Ruling Elders on Session believe about abortion?

All the Ruling Elders agreed with the position of the pastors cited in item 5 above. One added that "we Christians have a tremendous responsibility to help with the multitude of children born to people who are unable or unwilling to take care of them." Another noted that there may be cases of rape, incest, or being detrimental to the health of the mother in which abortion may be condoned. Another very wisely

stated that "I personally believe Pro-Life... [but] it is not my place to judge others, yet, with the love of Jesus, [I am to] be a witness to my beliefs and have compassion on others (referring to women who have had an abortion or are considering one), as Jesus would do in that same situation."

Questions Related to the Options Before Us

1) What are the options for Good Shepherd?

There are really just five options:

- 1) Stay, identify with, and support PC(USA) - and continue to try to fight the issues*
- 2) Stay but distance ourselves from PC(USA) and associate with the Fellowship of Presbyterians within PC(USA).*
- 3) Disaffiliate from PC(USA) and affiliate with the Evangelical Order of Presbyterians (ECO)*
- 4) Disaffiliate from PC(USA) and affiliate with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC)*
- 5) Disaffiliate from PC(USA) and affiliate with another Reformed Body (more on this below)*

2) What are the good things about the PC(USA) that are beneficial and do help us make disciples?

The PC(USA) has a strong ethos reflecting the whole gospel - proclaiming good news and demonstrating the love of Jesus in deeds. The Presbyterian Disaster Assistance program is one of the most responsive and effective groups in the world helping in times of disaster and crisis. Presbyterians once led the way in world missions, building hospitals, establishing universities, and advocating for people in need. As we move through this Season of Discernment the DWP will hear from PC(USA) representatives as to why we should continue to be part of this denomination and include this in its report to the congregation.

3) How would another denominational environment help us be faithful to our call? *Being part of a denomination with a more clear and common theological foundation builds trust, enthusiasm and unity. It is unity derived from a common understanding of theology, biblical interpretation, and call to ministry. It means sharing ministry values and goals. All of these would benefit Good Shepherd by placing the focus on ministry and mission rather than on politics, constant fighting, and the resulting distrust and fractures within the denomination.*

4) Are churches from Los Ranchos Presbytery leaving in mass?

Currently all churches have been asked to evaluate their mission focus and denominational affiliation. There are 58 churches in our presbytery. Some are choosing to do nothing. About a dozen churches are actively engaging a discernment process. The good news is that the Presbytery has been very open to and supportive of this call to discern our mission and affiliation.

5) Can the churches that wish to leave Los Ranchos Presbytery form a new Presbytery?

Not within the PC(USA). The latest General Assembly closed the door to that possibility. The closest thing would be to stay in PC(USA) and identify with the Fellowship of Presbyterians and form relationships with like-minded churches. As will be discussed below, affiliating with ECO or EPC would provide the possibility of forming or being part of a new Presbytery.

6) What is a reformed denomination?

Two answers. First, it is a denomination that holds to the tenets of the Reformed faith as its theological basis. Second, Reformed denominations affirm a number of Confessional statements that are consistent with the Reformation movement begun in the 15th century. The PC(USA) Book of Confessions contains eleven such "Confessions of Faith." Third, there is an organization known as the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Membership in this suggests (though is not a true "litmus test") that a particular denomination meets the criteria of being a Reformed denomination.

7) What are some of the reformed denominations?

There are many including all the "flavors" of Presbyterian denominations - PC(USA), Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC), Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (ECO) is soon to be admitted into the World Alliance, the Presbyterian Church of America and more. Other reformed bodies include Lutheran, Reformed Church of America, the Christian Reformed Church, the Dutch Reformed Church, and many others worldwide.

8) What happens if we join another reformed denomination and then have similar issues come up in the future? Would we have the same property issues?

If we decide to re-affiliate it will be with a body with whom we share a common theological perspective and foundational beliefs. The two most likely are EPC and ECO. Neither of these bodies has a "Property held in trust" clause. Each congregation holds title and owns their property - period. More importantly, both of these bodies have clear positions on theological and social issues. We would know what we were getting into and would be held accountable to maintain the standards of that body.

9) Is it possible to leave the Presbytery of Los Ranchos and join another (more "like-minded") Presbytery?

In rare cases where churches are in a geographically contiguous place, it is possible. It would be on a case-by-case basis with both presbyteries agreeing to it. However, Los Ranchos is one of the "best" presbyteries for a church like ours to be part of so this is really not necessary to consider.

10) What are the options for affiliating with other denominations?

As cited above, there are several options. The best of them are ECO and the EPC. There will be a study of both (and comparison with PC(USA)) that will enable a good decision about this.

11) Do other denominations have property trust clauses?

Neither ECO nor EPC have a property trust clause. The property is the congregation's.

12) Can we become an independent (non-denominational) church?

No. The PC(USA) polity states that a congregation may be dismissed with its property to another Reformed body. If we were to determine that we should become a non-denominational church we would have to realize that it means forfeiting the property and finding another facility for worship and ministry.

13) What happens if we determine we should re-affiliate with another body but can't find a suitable body to affiliate with?

We cannot be dismissed from the PC(USA) without concurrently seeking to be admitted into another denomination. If a suitable denomination is not found, we would not be dismissed. Fortunately, we have some very good, viable options.

14) How much do we fund PC(USA)?

We fund PC(USA) through two fiscal avenues. First, we pay a per capita "gift" of around \$27 per member annually (adds up to \$19,000 plus). In addition there is a voluntary "General Mission Giving" gift that is divided among the Presbytery, Synod and General Assembly for their mission projects and ministry support. We currently give \$2,500 for this.

Questions Related to the Discernment Process:

1) When we begin to discern our affiliation will we establish essentials and determine what we will not compromise on?

This has already been done in part. In recent years the Session has adopted resolutions that describe our perspectives on the issues of our denomination and how we will respond to the shifts that have taken place. Yes, we will be clear about what we deem to be of importance and what we deem to be going beyond the boundaries.

2) What is the time line for this discernment process?

The Discernment Work Party (DWP), at Session's request, has developed a timeline. We have completed a series of informational meetings. Resources are being gathered, written, and identified and will be placed on the GS website. We are targeting a Congregational Meeting on June 9, 2013 at which the congregation will be asked to respond to the Presbytery's questions: Do we wish to remain affiliated with PC(USA)? If not, do we wish to enter into a process of determining our best denominational affiliation? If the answer is "no" to the first and "yes" to the second, then we will begin a process to clarify our best course of action and negotiate with the Presbytery commission. A second vote would follow to respond to the question "Do we seek to be dismissed from PC(USA) and to affiliate with _____?" If these things can be accomplished in a timely manner, we could ask Presbytery to act on this at its September 2013 meeting.

3) How many churches in PLR are going through this process? How many nationwide?

As mentioned above, a dozen or so churches in our presbytery are seriously working through the discernment process. Though just 1/5th of the churches, the number of members in these churches is close to half of our presbytery total. Nationwide there are churches moving out of PC(USA) into ECO or EPC at a quickening rate. The PC(USA) membership continues to decline - roughly 55,000 per year. That number continues to increase because more larger churches are leaving.

4) Has there been an assessment of the pros and cons and impact on church membership of staying with PC(USA)?

There has not been a formal assessment. However, some people have communicated to the pastors that they will no longer be part of the PC(USA) and have left - just a few we know of. Others indicate they will not stay if we stay. On the other hand, some have indicated they are not concerned about our denomination's decisions and see no need to leave it. For a good number of people who participate in Good Shepherd, the question of denominational affiliation is not of any importance. The indication is that there will be little change in the Good Shepherd membership.

5) What is the process of determining the denomination we would affiliate with if we left PC(USA)?

The DWP will hear from representatives of PC(USA), ECO, and EPC, and will ask all three the same set of questions. This information will be put together in a report to the Session and made available to the congregation.

6) Where can we get more information about both sides of these issues?

Here are the helpful sources of information:

The Good Shepherd website (www.gspc.org) and go to the Season of Discernment page

Our church library will be a place to find the resources we post on the website

Visit the Presbytery of Los Ranchos website <http://www.losranchos.org> and go to the Discernment page

The Presbyterian Layman (www.layman.org) has a good resources page. They have done a much better job presenting information in a more fair way and are a useful resource

7) Is it possible to do a summary and print it and hand it out to the members?

Yes, the DWP reports to the Session. The Session wants to be sure as much information is available to everyone as possible. Printed resources will be placed in the library.

8) What if we need more time to complete the discernment process?

If we find we need more time, we will schedule accordingly. We want to do this process well, bathed in prayer, and be sure to include everyone in the congregation as much as possible. While we set the schedule, we will be careful to coordinate with Presbytery meetings and other significant dates. While we plan to move on this issue with dispatch, we will not be rushed.

9) Are members going to vote on our view of each of these issues?

As cited above, members will be asked to vote on two questions. First, "Do we affirm our affiliation with the PC(USA)?" If the answer is "No" then the second vote will be on the question "Do we wish to enter into a process to determine our denominational affiliation?"

Questions Related to the Impact of Disaffiliation From PC(USA)

1) If we leave PC(USA) how will staff/pastors be impacted - pension, benefits, etc.?

There is no negative impact on [pastors or staff. Benefits such as insurance and pensions are provided through programs of the body we would affiliate with. Existing pension benefits from PC(USA) remain intact, the pastors and participants are fully vested at their level of years of service.

2) What do the pastors and Session think about leaving the PC(USA)?

Session understands the problems and feels that certain non-negotiable boundaries have been crossed by PC(USA). We are deeply saddened by the choices our denomination has made. We long to be part of a ministry focused body that will encourage the ministry of making disciples. Session believes we should be part of a denomination that supports disciple making as a primary focus and is in line with what the Bible demands.

3) If we disaffiliate with PC(USA) what happens to the property?

As cited above, a presbytery may dismiss a congregation with its property. However, the "held in trust" clause is in place. Many presbyteries are dismissing churches with their property with terms that include a "Buyout" consisting of some years of "per capita" payments and some number of years of General

Mission Giving. The Presbytery of Los Ranchos is working now to prepare a proposal for gracious separation that includes the terms of dismissal with property. A recent General Assembly Judicial Commission decision has directed presbyteries to consider the value of the property in such proposals or terms of separation. We don't really know what that means. However, remember that the Presbytery "is us", that is, it is made up of pastors and elders who will have to approve a separation proposal. We expect to have more clarity on the costs and process in June.

4) Is Good Shepherd financially able to pay the required amounts?

We really don't know until we have studied the terms that the Presbytery of Los Ranchos puts forth. Buyout payments can be made over several years. We have some options that would help cover a buyout. It's premature to say anything more at this time. The Session will evaluate the proposal and come to the congregation with a solution.