

Discernment Considerations for our Presbyterian Affiliation

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Purpose & Background

As we have entered into discernment regarding our affiliation with Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA), we must all take a humble and prayerful approach to seeking God's calling for our church. Regardless of where we are in our faith journeys, it is important for each of us to be educated on the issues and pray for God to be active in our discernment.

The purpose of this document is to lay out the issues and impacts that have caused our current disconnect with PCUSA, and to provide considerations for action going forward. The decision to go through the discernment process was made by the Session in February 2016. However, a decision to leave PCUSA has NOT been made. The decision to stay or leave PCUSA for another Presbyterian denomination will be made through a vote of the congregation in the near future. Therefore, it is important for all members to understand the issues and options.

This document is written from the perspective of a Neelsville member and elder who has concluded, through much prayer and personal discernment, that NPC should disaffiliate with PCUSA and join the Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO). There are certainly other perspectives, and while several of those viewpoints are included here, this document makes the argument for aligning with a new denomination. Other points of view are welcome and necessary as we seek God's will for our church.

Our Faith & Call as Christians

The fundamental tenets of our Christian faith are that God is perfect in holiness, love, and justice, and He is the creator of everything in this world. There is one triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Human sin has separated us from God, but because of God's love, grace and mercy, He sent Jesus to be God incarnate and to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins. No one is able to come to God the Father except through Jesus Christ. The Bible is the authoritative word of God that was written by men inspired by the Holy Spirit. Jesus proclaimed that Scripture is historically reliable and the final court of appeal in matters of faith. He taught his disciples to look to Scripture as the norm for faith and practice. As Christians, we are called to confess our faith in Jesus, love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves. And finally, we will each stand before God in final judgment where Jesus will intervene on our behalf so that we may be reconciled with God in life eternal.

"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me ... Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father! ... The words I say are not my own, but my Father who lives in me does his work through me."

-- Jesus (John 14: 6-10, NLT)

"If you love me, obey my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth."

-- Jesus (John 14: 15-17, NLT)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the

renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

-- *Apostle Paul (Romans 12: 1-2, ESV)*

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

-- *Apostle Paul (Ephesians 2: 8-10, ESV)*

“The most important commandment is this: ‘Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all you mind, and all your strength.’ The second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other commandment is greater than these.”

-- *Jesus (Mark 12: 29-31, NLT)*

... for we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.” *(Isaiah 45:23)* So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

-- *Apostle Paul (Romans 14: 10-12, ESV)*

And now I make one more appeal, my dear brothers and sisters. Watch out for people who cause divisions and upset people’s faith by teaching things that are contrary to what you have been taught. Stay away from them. Such people are not serving Christ our Lord; they are serving their own personal interests. By smooth talk and glowing words they deceive innocent people.

-- *Apostle Paul (Romans 16: 17-18, NLT)*

Salvation through Jesus is the great gift from God and the good news to be shared with all. There is no perfection on this side of heaven, but the Bible is the authoritative word of God that teaches us how to live in our faith journey. We are to worship & pray to God, study & teach scripture, make disciples, care for the needs of others, live in fellowship with other Christians, and guard against false teaching in this fallen world until Jesus comes again.

Neelsville Presbyterian Church (NPC) Mission, Membership, & Leadership

As we have been led by the Holy Spirit over the years, NPC has developed a simple mission statement and discipleship process. Our mission is **to glorify God by being and making disciples of Jesus**, and this is supported by an action oriented discipleship process in which all members of NPC can participate: **1) Worship God, 2) Grow your faith, and 3) Go Serve!** As we fulfill our mission with this discipleship process, it is important that we recognize and **celebrate changed lives** along the way; our own lives, and the lives of those with whom we connect. With these latest refinements to our mission and discipleship process, the NPC Session has also taken on the direct oversight of the discipleship ministry rather than having a separate committee perform this function. A summary of the NPC mission and discipleship process is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: NPC Mission and Discipleship process

Membership at NPC is made up of people from many diverse backgrounds and heritage, but we come together as a church with one common bible-based, Christian culture to live out our mission within the tenets of our faith. The only requirements for those seeking membership at NPC are 1) a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ, and 2) the acceptance of personal responsibility in the life of the church. **One key responsibility of the entire**

congregation is to nurture those who are baptized to respond to the invitation to the Lord's Supper. The church nurtures those baptized as children through teaching the good news of the Gospel and how to develop a prayerful relationship with Jesus. This prepares them for their personal call to profess faith in Jesus Christ and to accept responsibility in the life of the church at the appropriate time.

Ordained officers of the church (Pastors, Elders, and Deacons) are called to lead NPC in discipleship, and in response to this call, they are ordained and installed by standing before the body of membership to answer affirmatively to the following questions from the PCUSA Book of Order:

- a) Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledging him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?
- b) Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to you?
- c) Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?
- d) Will you fulfill your ministry in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions?
- e) Will you be governed by our church's polity, and will you abide by its discipline? Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God's Word in Spirit?
- f) Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliations of the world?
- g) Do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church?
- h) Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?
- i) (1) (For ruling elders) Will you be a faithful ruling elder watching over the people, providing for their worship, nurture, and service? Will you share in the government and discipline, serving in councils of the church, and in your ministry will you try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?
(2) (For Deacons) Will you be a faithful deacon, teaching charity, urging concern, and directing the people's help to the friendless and those in need, and in our ministry will you try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?
(3) (for teaching elders/pastors) Will you be a faithful teaching elder, proclaiming the good news in the Word and Sacrament, teaching faith and caring for people? Will you be active in government and discipline, serving in the councils of the church; and in your ministry will you try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?

NPC currently has 351 members of the congregation, 48 elders, 77 deacons, and 2 pastors. **And once an officer of the church has been ordained, he or she remains committed to the responsibilities of ordination even after rolling off the Session or Deacon boards.** It is important for congregation members and officers to pray for spiritual guidance in carrying out their responsibilities.

PCUSA Challenges & Impacts

As we consider the core tenets of our Christian faith and our individual responsibilities as members and ordained officers of NPC, we must also consider where our denomination is leading us as a collective church. The fulfillment of our responsibilities in our discipleship mission can be aided or hindered by the leadership of our denomination. The NPC Session voted in Feb 2016 to enter into discernment regarding our denominational affiliation because we see that the theological practices of PCUSA are an increasing hindrance to fulfilling our mission.

While the stated positions of PCUSA indicate theological consistency with the tenets of our faith, in practice, PCUSA demonstrates inconsistencies and direct conflicts with our biblical theology. This theological disconnect in practice is the root problem, and there are many symptoms to this problem that are revealed in the more visible PCUSA positions on mission, leadership, stewardship, life, ordination, and marriage.

Theology

At NPC we believe that the Bible is the authoritative word of God; salvation comes through Christ alone; there is one triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and Jesus suffered an atoning death on the cross for all of our sins so that we can be reconciled with God.

However, increasingly in the PCUSA, leaders embrace a view that the Bible serves as a guide, and interpretations can change over time. This would indicate that the very nature of God changes over time with the ways of the world. In 2001, the PCUSA General Assembly (GA) rejected a motion to declare the “singular saving lordship of Jesus,” which would indicate that there are other ways to be reconciled with God. In 2006, GA embraced the Trinity Working Group suggestions to reevaluate the interpretation and definition of the Trinity. And there are increasing pastor voices in PCUSA that elevate man and diminish Christ’s atoning death on the cross. Even the most extreme pronouncements of views in blogs and other writings by PCUSA pastors that go against our reform theology have resulted in no disciplinary action from PCUSA.

The impact of our affiliation with a denomination that allows such extreme views by leaders and pastors that remain in good standing within PCUSA is significant. **It would be easy for us to continue rationalizing our way around this by stating our opposition to such views, but if we are to take our church membership and ordination vows seriously, it is clear that we must question our affiliation with PCUSA.** We are called to lead in discipleship, teach the word of God, and defend the teaching. How can NPC flourish in its mission while affiliated with a denomination that continually embraces the ways of the world rather than the ways of God. What is the legacy we will leave for our posterity if we refuse to confront these issues now?

Mission

As stated above, our NPC mission is to glorify God by being and making disciples of Jesus, and the fulfillment of this mission is our highest priority as a church. We should expect our denomination to share this priority view of our mission, but that is not the case. PCUSA has demonstrated for many years that it is more focused on political and social activism than it is on a discipleship mission. Of 62 overtures considered by the 2015 GA, two thirds dealt with political issues like gun control and divesting in Israel, one third dealt with internal governance issues, and none dealt with missionaries or evangelism. **NPC is focused on discipleship, but our denomination is distracted by politics.**

The impact of these political distractions at the presbytery and denominational levels within PCUSA is significant. As Presbyterians, we are a connectional church, which means that we are to walk in close fellowship with our denomination and other churches within the PCUSA. However, because PCUSA practices do not focus on our discipleship mission, we have lost that connectedness. For many years NPC has essentially operated as a congregational church versus a connectional church because of PCUSA’s misalignment with our mission. In 2012, NPC affiliated with a subgroup of churches within the PCUSA denomination called the Fellowship of Presbyterians, now called the Fellowship Community (FC), to help provide the connectedness that we lost at the denomination level. This FC affiliation has provided affirmation for our discipleship mission with other PCUSA churches, but

there remain three significant issues. First, we are still under the PCUSA umbrella and the practices that are misaligned with our discipleship mission. Second, the FC will continue to shrink over time as congregations leaving PCUSA at a rapid rate are generally aligned with FC views. And third, decisions of pastoral ordination will continue to be led by a presbytery that is misaligned with our theological views.

Leadership

Candidates for ordination increasingly face questions and criticisms for their orthodox views within our presbytery, and the NPC session is concerned about our ability to call a pastor in the future. We already have first-hand experience with this as our current senior pastor faced significant challenges getting through the examination process with National Capital Presbytery because of his orthodox views. In addition, the talent pool from which to call a new pastor will be increasingly sparse because the gifted young pastors that share our orthodoxy are drawn to other Presbyterian denominations like ECO and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC).

As NPC elders, it is our leadership's responsibility to anticipate potential problems in the future and ensure that we are affiliated within an environment that will allow our mission to flourish. The potential impact of this pastoral leadership issue is very high. **Even though this may not seem like a problem now, if our current senior pastor were to accept a new call, it would be very difficult to call a PCUSA pastor that shares our current orthodox views.**

Stewardship

All that we have is God's, and through His faithfulness to us, NPC members have been good stewards of our facilities and of our finances to further our discipleship mission over time. The generous pledging and giving from our congregation has allowed us to build and update needed facilities while funding many local and global missions and providing staff to operate our church. All praise be to God as this has been a great blessing for our church family for many years! **Even though our facilities have been financed and built entirely by the NPC membership over time, all of our property is held in trust for PCUSA.** We do not have ultimate control of our property.

The potential impact of our property being held in trust for PCUSA is also significant. We have been misaligned with PCUSA views and practices for decades, and discussions about leaving the denomination have persisted throughout that time. However, because we do not officially own and control our property, it is very difficult to leave PCUSA, by design, knowing that we will be required to pay the Presbytery to keep our property.

We do not yet know the cost assessment for NPC, and our historic White Church and cemetery must be taken into consideration, but we do know that it will cost something. Therefore, as we discern our calling to leave PCUSA, this issue of our property has been and will continue to be an emotional obstacle. As members and leaders of our church, we must continue to recognize that all we have is God's, and the price of discipleship is high. Therefore, we must be prepared to pay this cost as we are led to leave the denomination.

Life

PCUSA was a founding member of the Religious Coalition of Abortion Rights and has continued to support abortion ever since, including funding through its healthcare plan. NPC has been firmly pro-life in its actions since the 1980s, and has a "Relief of Conscience Status" in PCUSA indicating that our contributions to pensions or healthcare are not to be used for abortions.

The impact of this issue is quite profound for a church like ours that is rooted in biblical teaching. Abortion is the way of the world and legal in the US, but it clearly violates biblical teaching knowing that our relationship with God begins in the womb. While NPC has been a point of light on this issue within PCUSA, the politics of this issue will never yield to a pro-life position within PCUSA. The fact that a relief of conscience status has been established is confirmation that abortion violates God's law, and it is nothing more than a weak rationalization for remaining in PCUSA. What does it say about NPC to preach and teach God's word yet remain in a denomination that supports abortion?

Ordination

In 2010 PCUSA removed the 1996 requirement that pastors and officers must live "in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness." The fight to remove this language started from the very moment it was adopted in 1996. Every couple of years the GA voted to overturn this language and it was rejected by presbyteries by a progressively shrinking margin, until finally it was overturned in 2010 and the language was removed. **NPC has publicly disagreed with the removal of this language and continues to uphold fidelity & chastity for pastors and officers.**

This change on ordination may have seemed like a minor thing at the time that didn't affect most of us, but we are now seeing the bigger impact as it was the precursor to redefining marriage. As was stated previously, the root problem is a theological practice that allows for interpretations to change with the ways of the world, and this change demonstrates a symptom to that problem that opens the door for other ways of the world to be embraced by our denomination.

Marriage

In 2015, PCUSA changed the book of order to redefine marriage to be "between two people, traditionally a man and a woman," which now allows for same-sex marriage for the first time. In addition to this change in the definition of marriage, a new paragraph (W-4.9006) was added to the PCUSA's governing Book of Order as follows:

"Nothing herein shall compel a teaching elder to perform nor compel a session to authorize the use of church property for a marriage service that the teaching elder or the session believes is contrary to the teaching elder's or session's discernment of the Holy Spirit and their understanding of the Word of God."

NPC has consistently and publicly opposed same-sex marriage as an unbiblical practice for many years, and our session and pastors have taken the position that NPC will not perform same-sex marriages.

The impact of this change is perhaps the most visible symptom of the theological problem that we face because, along with fidelity and chastity for ordination, it has changed the written words in the Book of Order. **Unlike many other issues where PCUSA states the proper theology but is tolerant of practices that violate orthodox theology, we now have words written in the book of order that have profound theological and potentially legal implications.** Similar to the relief of conscience status with abortion, the new W-4.9006 paragraph basically acknowledges that the change on marriage violates biblical teachings. Also, similar to the language on fidelity and chastity, no one knows how long it will be before paragraph W-4.9006 will be removed and therefore compel a pastor and session to perform same-sex marriages. However, with history as a guide on ordination, it is possible that we will see W-4.9006 removed in the future.

Options to Consider in our Discernment

Stay Affiliated with PCUSA

The common arguments for staying in PCUSA revolve around the following points: 1) We should continue to be a voice in PCUSA to provide balance in our denomination. 2) We should stay to ensure unity within the denomination. 3) We may be less tolerant of other points of view if we leave, 4) We will have to pay too much money to keep our property if we leave. And 5) There is no perfect denomination with which to affiliate. Our human nature is to resist change and to worry about money, and therefore, the easiest thing to do is stay with PCUSA and continue along our current path. However, this would also require us to reconcile the significant theological differences that have caused disruption within our local church so that we can clearly communicate and justify why we should stay affiliated with PCUSA.

Disaffiliate with PCUSA and Join ECO

The process of disaffiliation with PCUSA tends to start with a focus on things that are causing conflict between NPC and PCUSA. However, during this process, it is important to focus on where we are going and what we want to become based on God's calling for us as a church. In 2014, a committee of session members explored the many different Presbyterian denominations. ECO (A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians) and EPC (Evangelical Presbyterian Churches) were the two that looked like good fits for NPC, and ECO stands out as the dynamically growing denomination that best fits the direction of NPC. More information about ECO can be reviewed at www.eco-pres.org, and its mission and core values are shown below.



Our Mission

To build flourishing churches that make disciples of Jesus Christ.

Our Core Values

Jesus-shaped Identity:

We believe Jesus Christ must be at the center of our lives and making disciples of Jesus at the core of our ministry.

Biblical Integrity:

We believe the Bible is the unique and authoritative Word of God, which teaches all that is necessary for faith and life. The prominence of God's Word over our lives shapes our priorities, and the unrivaled authority of the Bible directs our actions to be in concert with Christ's very best for our lives.

Thoughtful Theology:

We believe in theological education, constant learning, and the life of the mind, and celebrate this as one of the treasures of our Reformed heritage.

Accountable Community:

We believe guidance is a corporate spiritual experience. We want to connect leaders to one

another in healthy relationships of accountability, synergy, and care.

Egalitarian Ministry:

We believe in unleashing the ministry gifts of women, men, and every ethnic group.

Missional Centrality:

We believe in living out the whole of the Great Commission – including evangelism, spiritual formation, compassion, and redemptive justice – in our communities and around the world.

Center-focused Spirituality:

We believe in calling people to the core of what it means to be followers of Jesus – what “mere Christianity” is and does – and not fixate on the boundaries.

Leadership Velocity:

We believe identifying and developing gospel-centered leaders is critical for the church, and a great leadership culture is risk-taking, innovative, and organic.

Kingdom Vitality:

We believe congregations should vigorously reproduce new missional communities to expand the Kingdom of God.

Should NPC Change its Presbyterian Affiliation?

From the point of view of the author who has examined and prayed about this extensively, the short answer is "Yes." NPC should disaffiliate with PCUSA and affiliate with the Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO). With careful examination of the key issues on theology, mission, leadership, stewardship, life, ordination, and marriage, there is a compelling argument for making this change. However, this is a decision that will be made by a vote of each member as part of this discernment process. **With grace and love, there is every reason to believe that we can wrap our arms around our entire congregation and simply align with a new Presbyterian denomination.**

As for the primary points for staying in PCUSA, it is clear from our history that NPC has been a voice of dissent within our denomination for many years on the key issues. However, with the rapid departure of churches like NPC in recent years, PCUSA is now accelerating in a direction that opposes ours, so our voice has become less relevant. Our unity in the body of Christ is with the broader Christian faith, not just within our own denomination. Therefore, a change to ECO does not disrupt unity. The diversity within our church membership is evidence that we welcome all that wish to join our church family regardless of background and points of view, and this will not change. Also, as we know from scripture and have heard from the pulpit, the cost of discipleship is high. So, as we consider the cost of a settlement for our property, we should keep in mind that it is only money, and it all belongs to God. And finally, we recognize that there is no perfect denomination, and that is not our pursuit. However, we also recognize that alignment with a denomination that firmly supports our orthodox theology will provide the environment that we must pursue for our discipleship mission to flourish.

As we continue to pray for the leading of the Holy Spirit and examine our responsibilities as members and ordained leaders at NPC, my hope is that it will become clear that this course of action is right and necessary for NPC to flourish in its discipleship mission.

May God continue to bless Neelsville as we seek His call for our church.