

CM - NOTE 12 - Responding Pastorally to Troubled Churches

November 2006

The Office of the General Assembly is grateful for presbyteries that are faithfully seeking to engage Presbyterians who are troubled by General Assembly actions. We recognize the enormous commitment presbyteries and staffs have made to reach out to these brothers and sisters in Christ and attempt to address their pain and distress. We are aware that several presbyteries have developed sensitive policies to guide them in engaging with sessions and congregations who feel estrangement with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The Presbyteries of New Covenant and Wabash Valley consulted with our offices in developing such policies and we commend such models to presbyteries.

We want to begin with Scripture, in which Jesus teaches us to go to sisters and brothers,¹ seeking to understand the point of this disagreement. We commend using a response team that seeks a time of prayer and conversation aimed at understanding the conflict and identifying steps toward reconciliation. Perhaps incorrect or incomplete information is behind the church's dispute, or they feel that no one is listening. In our experience, such proactive reaching out often strengthens relationships and helps sessions and congregations regain their excitement for and commitment to the mission and ministries of their presbytery.

We sadly recognize that there are occasionally situations where sessions and congregations do accurately understand the policies and stances of the PC(USA) and simply disagree with them. When a presbytery encounters such a situation, it may well be time for the presbytery to engage the session/congregation on a new level. While recognizing that dissent is an historical right of all Presbyterians,² sometimes a presbytery will find it necessary to discuss the painful risk that a session/congregation may come to desire to withdraw from the PC(USA). In such situations, we encourage the presbytery to send in a team to study and recommend appropriate action. We also encourage sessions to welcome such teams. We are all reminded that such processes are always designed to foster reconciliation whenever possible and must be guided by seeking to discern what will most advance the Presbyterian mission in that geographical area,³ and that Presbyterians are not permitted to develop "quick exit" processes.⁴

In our experience, sessions/congregations are most receptive when the presbytery acknowledges from the beginning that the presbytery does have the authority to dismiss a congregation to another reformed body,⁵ but that no such action can be taken without an extensive evaluation by the presbytery. Normally, a presbytery will find it necessary for its team to review minutes and other records, speak with members of the session and congregation, and meet with the pastor(s). We hope a session will welcome and cooperate with such teams. Only after such a careful process will the presbytery be in the place to evaluate a request for dismissal or to decide that another course of action is most appropriate to advance the mission of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in that geographic area.

¹ Matthew 5:25.

² See Advisory Opinion #2 for a discussion of dissent and defiance ([Advisory Opinions - Note #2](#)).

³ *Book of Order*, G-11.0103a.

⁴ *Strong v. Bagby*

⁵ *Book of Order*, G-11.0103i.