

**Guidelines for Discernment Task Forces  
The Presbytery of Whitewater Valley  
2007**

The Presbytery of Whitewater Valley affirms the joy of Christ and the importance of a deep commitment to preserving the unity of our presbytery.

*Guiding Principles*

Unity in Christ is a hallmark of the church. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to live together to the glory of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our Presbyterian Church (USA) is a demonstration of that common witness.

The congregations of the Presbytery of Whitewater Valley are not separate entities occasionally joined in faith and mission, but rather one organic whole. We are one community and members of one another. Together we celebrate the commonwealth of God's grace.

Even in our unity, we acknowledge that our demonstration of God's purposes is provisional, and we recognize that our life together does not fully reflect God's intention. The Presbytery of Whitewater Valley acknowledges that a local congregation may question whether, in good conscience, it may continue to participate as a part of this unity. In such as instance, our presbytery shall commit itself to participate in a discernment process with a local congregation. If the presbytery and congregation together conclude that a substantial majority of the congregation are determined to separate from the Presbyterian Church (USA), the presbytery shall commit itself to a faithful and equitable process through which the congregation may be dismissed to another denomination.

This discernment process will seek to be deeply collegial, offering sensitivity, respect and care to all. It will attempt to avoid adversarial positioning, but rather, seek to be mutually affirming. Through this process, we will trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The presbytery will strive to offer pastoral care, both to those members who believe themselves called to depart and those who believe themselves called to remain.

If a session realizes a need for such discernment, the Committee on Ministry will create a task force to guide the process, in consultation with the Presbytery's Coordinating Council and the Board of Directors. The task force will address all relevant issues, including concerns related to property and finance.

In all our discussions and actions, we will strive to glorify Jesus Christ. Throughout discussions or even disagreement, we will seek to demonstrate the unity that God intends.

*Process Design*

If a session realizes a need for such discernment, the Committee on Ministry will create a task force to guide the process, in consultation with the presbytery moderator, executive presbyter, and stated clerk.

The task force will seek to discover all possible relevant information, carefully considering a wide variety of perspectives.

*One of the first and foremost responsibilities of the task force is to listen*

- to those in favor of separation
- to those who wish to remain a part of the Presbyterian Church (USA)
- to those who are uncertain of their perspective
- to the pastor(s)
- to the church officers and informal leaders of the congregation
- to a broad representation of congregation members

*The task force will work with the congregation to seek discernment and the leading of the Holy Spirit. This process will include*

helping the congregation understand the task force cares for everyone in the church and to assist in finding the best possible outcome for all members

making clear that the task force is to gather information and to make recommendations, but any decision to dismiss a congregation will be made only by the presbytery assembly

providing opportunities for expression by any minority of the congregation and to build processes that offer care and affirm their hopes and concerns

securing the full cooperation of the congregation in discernment. This includes the congregation providing all requested information to the task force, including contact information for all active and inactive members, and contact information for all church officers currently serving on the session and the board of deacons.

*As the task force and the congregation seek discernment together, the task force will be mindful of its relationship with the presbytery. The task force will*

consult with presbytery entities, officers, leaders and staff as needed

consider possible responses to a potential request for dismissal from the Presbyterian Church (USA) by the congregation and its impact on the mission of the Presbyterian Church (USA)

consult with neighboring churches, including their perspective on the mission of the Presbyterian Church (USA), as well as the possibility of providing pastoral care.

#### *Findings and Recommendations*

Task force shall communicate regularly its findings with appropriate entities and leadership persons in the presbytery. The task force shall share its recommendations with the Committee on Ministry, which will summarily transmit a complete report with recommendations to the appropriate presbytery entities and leaders.

Throughout the processes of discernment, all parties shall maintain an attitude and goal of striving to glorify Jesus Christ. Throughout discussions and even disagreement, the parties will seek to demonstrate the unique unity that God intends.

**Support for Discernment  
The Presbytery of Whitewater Valley  
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Discernment Task Forces will be the heart of our relationship with any congregation that may question whether they can continue as part of our presbytery.

To support our presbytery in this important time, the Presbytery Coordinating Council also recognizes the following:

An ongoing *Conversation and Education Group* is needed to create opportunities for sharing and listening with the goals of greater respect, deeper relationships, and a clear understanding of the peace, unity and purity to which we are called. We hope that grace, clarity, and mutuality about examination expectations might emerge from those conversations as concerns are allayed. At best, this group may also serve to assist sessions with their questions or concerns about peace, unity and purity. This group will be established by the Presbytery Coordinating Council, under the leadership of Bob Anderson, our Interim Executive Presbyter.

In the event that a congregation approaches the presbytery, an immediate *Response Team* will be necessary. Before the Committee on Ministry is able to appoint a Discernment Task Force, an initial group will serve to respond to any questions or issues from a congregation. The Response Team will include the Interim Executive Presbyter, Bob Anderson; Stated Clerk, Kim Leech; Moderator of Presbytery, Betty-Alice Almeida; Moderator of Presbytery Council, Glen Bell; and Moderator of the Committee on Ministry, Alan Thames.

Although we hope subsequent events will not demonstrate any need, an *Administrative Commission* (G-9.0503) remains an option of our polity. While our approach to any congregations that may question whether they can continue as part of our presbytery should always be directed by our guiding principles (trusting in the guidance of the Holy Spirit, offering sensitivity, respect and care in deeply collegial and mutually affirming ways), we recognize that precipitous action by a congregation (such as seeking a court order against the presbytery) may lead to the need for an Administrative Commission.