

Additional Info About Next Week's Vote

Answers to Your Questions

The PCUSA theologian said the amendment we were upset about failed. If so, why do we still feel we should leave?

First, we are choosing to re-align with a more like-minded branch of our Presbyterian family. Our struggles with our present denomination go back many years and are not based on any one amendment, policy, or stance. The gradual loss of certainty about who Jesus is, the loss of respect for the Bible as our authority – these are the core reasons for our desire to re-align.

The amendment voted on last year did fail, but the determination to remove the “fidelity and chastity” standards for ordination marches on. The issue returns and returns and the battle is fought over and over again, using up time, energy, and money that should be spent on ministry.

In 2008, two long-standing Authoritative Interpretations which affirmed biblical standards for sexuality were removed by majority vote of the General Assembly. A new AI was voted into place which allows one to “scruple” ordination standards, both beliefs (which one could previously scruple) and practices (which previously couldn't be scrupled). Scrupling basically means a candidate can say “I won't abide by that” and the examining body (any individual Presbytery) can either accept or deny that exception.

Just last week, on October 30, the church's highest court ruled on two cases concerning two individuals who have said they wish to be ordained but will not abide by the Book of Order standard of fidelity in marriage and chastity in singleness. The court ruled that their exceptions do not bar them from standing for ordination. If you'd like to read more about this, there are articles describing the events in greater detail. The first is from the Presbyterian Layman: <http://www.layman.org/news.aspx?article=26501>. The other is from More Light Presbyterians, an advocacy group for gay and lesbian causes: <http://www.mlp.org/article.php?story=20091104062646886>.

The EPC Stated Clerk said that ordaining women was a “non-essential”. Does that mean they don't think it's important? It is to me!

The word “non-essential” may be confusing. For those who know the EPC well, the word “non-essential” means something very specific. In the EPC, non-essentials are those matters which, while important, don't have any direct relationship to saving faith in Jesus Christ. The motto of the EPC is *In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity*. The EPC lists its Essentials in the document “Essentials of Our Faith,” which is one of the most encouraging documents we as a Session have seen in a long time! Read the document at: <http://www.epc.org/about-the-epc/beliefs/essentials-of-our-faith/> or pick up a copy at the denominational issues table in the gathering place.

The ordination of women as pastors is an area of liberty in the EPC; it is not an essential on which all must hold the same view. As many female clergy would tell you, there are God-fearing, prayerful, and deeply committed Christians who disagree on both sides of this issue. While this is a “nonessential” to the EPC, it is something our church has made a decision about and our recommendation to transfer to the EPC in no way suggests that this has again become an open question for us. In the EPC, women serve as deacons and elders based entirely on the decision of each congregation so there is no conflict for us there. Women pastors, or Teaching Elders as they are called in the EPC, must be approved by the presbytery as well as the congregation. For many presbyteries, this is new territory and the influx of PCUSA churches has brought the question to the forefront. Many churches entering the EPC have women pastors, just as we do.

We are convinced that the EPC leadership is deeply committed to finding a solution, one that will honor the differences of opinion on this issue while still permitting liberty to congregations, as offering liberty about nonessentials is a core value of the denomination. Just last week in Memphis, a task force charged with the task of crafting a solution met to begin its work in earnest. Dr. Jeff Jeremiah (stated clerk of the EPC) assured our Session and pastors that smart and prayerful people are hard at work on a solution which will go before the General Assembly next June. Members of our Session have studied this matter carefully and are confident the EPC will be a home for Southport just as we are.

Tell me more about the vote next weekend – what will it look like and what does it mean for our future?

Every person on the church membership roll is encouraged to come to SPC either from 5 - 6:30 p.m. Saturday or from 8 a.m. to about 1 p.m. Sunday to vote. When you arrive, go to the doors of the gym where you will be identified on the membership roll then given a paper ballot. You will then mark your ballot and exit the other side of the gym. The question is: **“Do you support the Session’s recommendation that SPC seek dismissal from the PCUSA and join the EPC?”** You will mark **YES** (I agree) or **NO** (I do not agree, which means you want us to stay in the PCUSA). The votes will be counted on Monday by representatives of both our church and the Presbytery and will be presented to the Committee on Ministry at their meeting on November 18. This result, along with a full summary of the process completed so far, will be used by that committee to form a recommendation which will be presented to the entire Whitewater Valley Presbytery at its December 4 meeting. As soon as we have results of the weekend vote, we will also find a way to make them known to you, but we will all have to wait to see what the Committee on Ministry, and subsequently the entire Presbytery, choose to do with the results of this vote. It is important to say that our vote does not bind the Presbytery to any particular action – even if we had 100% member turnout and 100% support, the Presbytery could still refuse to release us. Still, we have found the process to date to be one of mutual respect and it is our hope that a high percentage turn-out showing a strongly unified congregation will result in a decisive recommendation to the entire Presbytery. We know that a strong turnout and a high percentage of unity can only help us as we try to move to the next step of a negotiated agreement. Similarly, a low turnout or a mixed result could certainly slow our process down. Regardless of your stance on this issue, what we most seek is a genuine poll which shows the truth of the wishes of our entire congregation. Therefore, the Session will assist you if you need help to come for the vote.

If you need a ride, or more information, or need to check your membership status, please contact any Elder. We cannot emphasize strongly enough how important your attendance is!

Finally, in the spirit of mutual respect, the Committee on Ministry has permitted us to offer an absentee “affirmation of support” for those who simply cannot be here. These are **NOT** “votes” and they will **not** be counted in the official vote tally; they will be reported separately. Both our Elders and the COM felt that our members who are unable to be present due to illness or travel or serving in missions or the military – their voices should be heard even though their votes won’t count. Please let an Elder know how we might reach any individual you know of who may be unable to join us next weekend so their voices might be heard about SPC’s future.

What can we be doing between now and next weekend?

If you have time to make phone calls, please let any Elder know. We are trying to contact many people on our membership rolls who might not know about this congregational action and we could use your help in getting out the information. Also, if you’d be willing to give a ride to someone who needs it or take a ballot to a shut-in, let us know. Most importantly, please pray throughout this week that our turnout will be high and our voice definitive as we stand together as the congregation of Southport Presbyterian Church to make our discernment for our future clear. In addition to personal prayer, there is going to be a prayer vigil (and an invitation to fasting) beginning at 4 p.m. on Saturday, Nov. 14 and extending through Sunday until the vote is complete. If you would like to sign up to pray at the church, this can be done by contacting Jim or Gloria Taylor at 346-0557 or via their e-mail at jgtaylor74@juno.com. There will also be a table in the Gathering Place this weekend to sign up if you’d like to formally commit to participate. Please pray not only for our vote but also for those who must decide afterward what to do with the information gained this weekend – please pray for our colleagues from the Whitewater Valley Presbytery at large and specifically for those who serve on the Committee on Ministry. And we appreciate your continued prayers for the local leadership of this church, the congregation as a whole, and all who are ministered to by this remarkable church. May Jesus lead us forward, and may we be both bold and humble as we register our own discernment of where he has asked us to stand.

What about our Pastors? The fact that they’ve been silent about this recommendation concerns me.

It is understandable that many in the congregation think it would be easier to cast a vote if they knew where each pastor stood on the issue before us. But during the very earliest conversations about this process, the Session and pastors agreed that the process of seeking dismissal must be an Elder-led and Elder-facilitated process. One reason was that SPC has a history of loving its pastors deeply! This says a great deal about the pastors who’ve served us over the years and about this congregation that abounds with a desire to bless and love those who serve us. But as we considered what this decision is really about, we felt it was important to separate the decision from any and all personalities around it. Instead of asking what these three individuals think, our discernment led us to believe that the truer question was “where will this congregation best be able to serve its unique ministry and mission 20 years into our future?” Who is this church, who are we called to be, and where can we best meet that call for the future? The 175th anniversary

celebrations reminded us that this congregation has not only a present, but a rich past filled with people who thought about the future – our present – and we need to do the same for generations to come. So, where should SPC be in the future to remain a Biblically grounded, evangelical, vibrant congregation fulfilling the Great Commission and living out the life of discipleship as individuals and as a congregation 20 years from now? The Session has prayed, as individuals and as a group, fasted, had innumerable meetings and discussions, sought wise counsel and made decisions about how we would go forward through this process valuing humility, accountability and truth-telling. The Session's recommendation represents our answer to the question of where our future lies.

Early in our discernment, we also looked at other congregations who had gone through this process. We saw how much work and time it would entail. Our pastors have already added many additional responsibilities as they work without a senior pastor. The pastors and Elders agreed that the pastors should do the work of caring for this congregation and the Elders should do the work of the discernment and dismissal process. Each of our pastors has committed to also pray with us and for us, and our respect for them is great. All of us – the pastors and the Session – trust that God will lead his people and we entrust the future of this remarkable congregation to Him.