



Things to Consider Before Leaving the PC(USA): A Checklist for Congregations Considering ECO

1. Are you clear why your mission requires you to seek dismissal from the PC(USA)?

Dismissal is a serious and potentially costly action. Dismissal will cost you time, resources, and relationships. This “checklist” begins with the single most important question that you, your session, and ultimately your congregation must be able to answer. Does faithfulness to the mission of Christ require your congregation to seek dismissal from the PC(USA)? If so, the cost will be worth it. It is only through ongoing prayer and open discussions, however, that the necessity of dismissal can be evaluated. Two parables of Jesus speak to this need for discernment and clarity.

“The Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.” Matthew 13:45-46

“For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, to see if he has enough to complete it?” Luke 14:28

The decision to *explore* is not the decision to *proceed*. Take this process one step at a time, and be clear about what you discover.

Once you have made the decision to explore dismissal, there is much preparation that will need to be done. There are many “surprises” that can be avoided by careful planning. While each congregation’s situation will vary, the remainder of this “checklist” outlines several of the areas that may require your attention.

2. Is the leadership of the congregation united, fully engaged, knowledgeable, and prepared? Is the congregation fully informed?

Your session and other significant leaders must be able and willing to engage the congregation--to explain, to listen, to acknowledge their feelings of fear and loss, to lead from the center, to stay the course. Many presbyteries will want to have discussions with the congregation as part of their discernment process, and the congregation needs to be informed and prepared before these discussions happen. Before meeting with the presbytery, the congregation must understand the “great price” of the pearl—knowing why they are exploring dismissal and with whom they are considering affiliation.

We must pray for unity in congregational leadership and prepare for less than unanimity in the congregation. Dismissal involves so many parts of a congregation's life and history that, for some, the cost of dismissal may seem too great. Christ-like leadership in the congregation acknowledges these feelings and lovingly shepherds these brothers and sisters.

3. Are you in open and honest discussion with your presbytery as you consider the need for dismissal?

Dismissing a congregation can be as emotionally wrenching and practically difficult for the presbytery as for church members. “Dismissal” requires a relationship of cooperation and trust between congregation and presbytery. A congregation exploring dismissal should assume responsibility and initiative for a reasoned and principled discussion with your presbytery. The desire must never be for rancor, but always be Christ-honoring; a mutual blessing for the mission to which we are called.

4. Has your presbytery adopted a “gracious dismissal policy” and do you and your Session know it well?

The 2008 General Assembly passed a commissioners’ resolution urging presbyteries to create a “gracious, pastoral response to churches requesting dismissal from the PC(USA)” and suggesting guidelines. Have you read this document and/or shared it with your presbytery leadership? If your presbytery has not adopted a gracious dismissal policy, it may be prudent to urge and to be actively involved in the crafting of such a policy before pressing your request for dismissal.

5. What will you take with you on your journey? Is your house in order?

Presbyterians are well-known for fighting over buildings. The mission of Christ and ECO is not dependent on property. A congregation's real estate may well be an effective tool for its mission, and one that the congregation might wish to retain. But Jesus is quite severe about those who would hold on to material goods rather than follow him, and we need to not be hostage to our property and buildings—regardless of denominational affiliation. You need to be clear why, for missional reasons, your congregation wants to keep the building. For many of us, the greatest enemy in property battles is our own attachment. Be clear about why your mission needs particular property and real estate. Be honest and generous toward those beyond your congregation who feel a sense of partnership in your mission and property.

- Commission a title search for all real estate for which your congregation is responsible, no matter where or with whom title is lodged. Do this as a favor to yourselves and to your presbytery. There are many surprises and errors in property records. Some of these can be amusing, but some can take considerable time and effort to resolve.
- Conduct a full review of your congregation’s finances. This is a good practice at every year-end but, in the exploration of dismissal, the session, congregation, and presbytery all will have legitimate questions and the right to know an accurate accounting of your congregation’s assets.
- Review the membership rolls. Are your membership rolls accurate and up to date? The consideration of a request for dismissal requires conversation with and a formal vote of the “active members” of your congregation.
- Consult your bylaws. Have you read your bylaws carefully? Is your congregation incorporated and is it current with your State? Do you know what might be required of you by your State as part of dismissal to another Reformed body?

6. Do you know where are you going and why?

ECO is not a way to get “out” of the PC(USA). It has been formed of necessity so congregations and individuals can maintain the theological integrity of their witness, remain in communion with others in the global Church, remain in ministry connection with others in the PC(USA) through the Fellowship of Presbyterians, and discover new ways of working together in the mission of Jesus Christ for the glory of God and the welfare of God’s people. Your congregation needs to understand not only the purpose for exploring dismissal but also the missional advantage(s) of their intended destination. What can you accomplish or accomplish better with your new affiliation that you cannot accomplish now? What are the primary and secondary advantages of this decision for your congregation’s mission and values?

In these early days, part of joining ECO is the opportunity to be participating in its initial organization. Your congregation needs to know they will have a role in crafting something new for the sake of Jesus Christ.

7. Are you still praying?

The role of deep searching prayer in this process cannot be overstated—not just acknowledging God at the start of meetings and conversations or, worse yet, asking God to bless what you have already decided to do. Careful deliberation on the decision to leave the PC(USA) can create a season of potent spiritual growth for you and your congregation. Keep listening for God’s leading and ask others whom you trust to join you in prayer.

More than anything, rejoice in the opportunity you have, within or beyond the PC(USA), to join with others who are committed to being like-minded with Christ and discovering new ways of “being church” together.