

## Frequently Asked Questions ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians

Many congregations, pastors and other leaders are interested in learning more about ECO. We have created an ECO Information Series which can be found under the Resources tab on our website, [www.eco-pres.org](http://www.eco-pres.org). This 6-session series contains a lot of helpful information. There are some questions, however, that get asked so frequently that we felt it was advantageous to create an FAQ document.

### **How many churches are in ECO?**

We currently have over 200 congregations in ECO as well as a couple dozen churches that are in various stages of being planted. In addition, there are more than 150 churches that are in the process of joining ECO. A current list of congregations and clergy, as well as an interactive map, can be found on our website at [www.eco-pres.org](http://www.eco-pres.org). Congregations are also listed under each presbytery.

### **How many covenant partners (members) are in ECO?**

There are over 80,000 covenant partners within ECO churches. The average size of an ECO congregation is approximately 400 members per church.

### **How many presbyteries are in ECO?**

There are currently nine presbyteries and we are preparing in 2016 to grow to eighteen presbyteries. A full list of presbyteries and the geography that they cover can also be found on our website, [www.eco-pres.org](http://www.eco-pres.org).

### **How is ECO funded?**

ECO receives 1% of a congregation's annual budget. This supports ECO nationally, but funds are also given to each of our local presbyteries. In the future, presbyteries may need to charge congregations a nominal amount to support a local budget.

### **If a congregation wants to join ECO, when and how should they apply?**

Applications can be obtained by e-mailing [office@eco-pres.org](mailto:office@eco-pres.org). If a congregation is transferring from another denomination, applications to join ECO should be submitted:

- At least 60 days prior to the congregation voting to join ECO. This way a congregation can know they are accepted by ECO before they go through a congregational vote.
- At least 90 days prior to a congregation's anticipated date of entering ECO. This timeframe allows the ECO benefits group to work with pastors and staff to ensure a smooth benefit transfer.

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Ideally, the earlier applications are submitted, the better. However, submitting an application to ECO doesn't mandate that a church then joins ECO.

### **What happens in the application process for a congregation?**

After the session applies to ECO, the session will be interviewed by a couple of members of the ECO presbytery that they are seeking to join. Ideally, this interview is done in person, but it can also be done via phone or videoconference. After a successful interview, the session receives a letter that it will be received into the ECO presbytery pending dismissal from their judicatory.

If a congregation is independent prior to joining ECO, then the acceptance letter will state that they are received into membership when all necessary paperwork has been completed.

### **What happens in the application process for a pastor?**

The process for a pastor transferring his or her ordination to ECO mirrors the application process for the session. The pastor will submit an application and be interviewed by a few people who are commissioned to receive transferred pastors pending dismissal from their previous denomination.

### **What is ECO looking for in the interview?**

ECO is looking for several things. First, we want to make sure the congregation isn't seeking to come to ECO because they are primarily angry about their current situation. We want to make sure a congregation will use their opportunity to join ECO to become bolder and more aggressive in what God has called them to do. Second, we want to make sure the session understands the covenantal nature of ECO and will participate in Mission Affinity Groups (MAGs) and that the pastor(s) will be in a Pastor Covenant Group (PCG) as well. Third, we want to make sure that congregations will ensure that those whom they ordain as elders and deacons adhere to the essentials.

### **Do the pastor(s) have to transfer ordination to ECO if a congregation transfers?**

A pastor doesn't have to switch his or her ordination, but he or she must be an affiliate pastor within ECO. An affiliate pastor is one who holds his or her ordination in different denomination but has permission to pastor within an ECO congregation. If the pastor is PC(USA), the pastor must have the call to an ECO congregation validated by his or her PC(USA) presbytery in order to remain in the Board of Pensions of the PC(USA).

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**Do Affiliate Pastors vote in Presbytery or Synod?**

Only affiliate pastors who serve as the pastor/head of staff of an ECO congregation are entitled to vote during a presbytery or synod meeting. Affiliates who are serving as associates or assistant pastors of congregations have voice but no vote in presbytery and do not have voice within the synod.

**How does a church get a new pastor?**

ECO presbyteries create a process that meets the needs of individual church as they are looking for a pastor. For example, in some cases (like those with a long tenured pastor), it makes sense to have an interim period so that the next pastor doesn't become a default interim pastor. In other cases, it may be advantageous for a congregation to begin looking for a pastor sooner. The ECO presbytery will work with the congregation to determine the best process. Once a congregation is ready to start searching, the job description will be posted on ECO's website and people will begin applying.

**What seminaries are approved by ECO?**

There are no seminaries that are pre-approved or banned from consideration. It is our intention to allow Presbytery Ministry Ordination Teams (PMOTs) to work with candidates for ministry to determine the best route for their ministries. In some instances, people will become resident students of places like Gordon-Conwell and Fuller. In other cases, they may choose more local seminaries or have on-line education. Candidates, however, should not choose a course of education until they have talked with their presbytery leadership.

**Can an ECO pastor serve a congregation of another denomination?**

Yes, but of course the judicatory of the other denomination must approve the ECO pastor to serve in their particular congregation. If the other denomination is receptive, then the pastor can have that call validated by his or her ECO presbytery.

**If a pastor leaves the PC(USA), what happens to her/his pension?**

If pastor is vested within the PC(USA) and leaves, then the PC(USA) considers him or her a vested lay person in the Board of Pensions. This means that the pastor still gets occasional increases in his or her pension, but does not continue to pay into the pension. The pastor then notifies the Board of Pensions when he or she wants to begin to draw out retirement per the BOP's policies. Pastors who are switching to ECO can consult with our financial advisors to determine their estimated retirement with PC(USA) and the funds that will need to be saved in a new retirement plan.

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**What kind of pension does ECO have?**

The PC(USA) program is a defined benefit program. This means that one gets a specific amount of money for the rest of his or her life and there is a certain amount of money that goes to a surviving spouse as well. ECO has a defined contribution meaning that the money that is in your account is your money.

Every congregation must contribute an additional 10% of a pastors' salary into a 403b9. This plan is through Envoy Financial and has a Roth feature if the pastor chooses. Pastors can also customize how aggressive or risky they want their money to be invested. If there are remaining funds left after a pastor and spouse pass away then the funds become part of the estate and distributed according to the estate plan of the pastor.

**What kind of health insurance does ECO have?**

ECO uses Cigna through open access. The core program is similar in coverage to what pastors have experienced in the PC(USA). There are other options besides the core program as well. To see get more information about the benefit programs, view the page on the website. <http://eco-pres.org/membership/benefits-insurance-retirement/>.

**Questions Related to Commissioning Officers**

**ECO states that officers can be commissioned for greater service. How is this similar or different than commissioning officers in the PC(USA)?**

See 2.0501-2.0503 of our polity.

There are two types of commissioning officers for service in two different circumstances. The first circumstance is serving as a commissioned officer under the authority of an ordained pastor and the session. The second circumstance is when an officer is commissioned to serve as the pastor of the congregation. The second circumstance has more familiarity to those coming from the PC(USA) than the first so we will address it first.

**How do commissioned officers serve as pastors of a congregation?**

This aspect of commissioning has the greatest familiarity from those coming in the PC(USA). Some churches, because of size or ethnicity, have found it more advantageous to have a layperson serve as their pastor. This person may have a second job or may have not have had the full credentials needed to be ordained as an ECO pastor. It is the job of the presbytery to ensure these officers are appropriately trained both theologically and with ministry

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skills. See 2.0503 of our polity.

**a. What training is required for an officer to serve as the pastor of a congregation?**

This is a presbytery-by-presbytery decision and should be influenced by the type and needs of the congregation. ECO is in the midst of creating potential courses and a track that one could take along with practical ministry experience so that he or she could be commissioned in this way.

**b. If I am already serving as a pastor of a congregation in the PC(USA) as a commissioned elder, how does my transfer take place?**

In this situation, you would fill out a pastor application and check the box that you are a CLP. The examining group from the ECO presbytery will examine you in a fashion similar to how they would examine a pastor. If everything is in order, then you will simply be transferred in as a CLP for that congregation. If it is determined that there is not a good fit with ECO, or more training is needed, the examining group from the ECO presbytery (potentially in consultation with the Pastoral Ministry and Ordination Team), will determine next steps.

**c. Does a commissioned elder or deacon in this situation have a vote at presbytery?**

Yes – Commissioned elders and deacons have all of the same rights and privileges as a pastor who is ordained as such within ECO.

**d. What if I am not an elder or deacon and am moving toward being a commissioned officer?**

ECO polity allows deacons to be ordained and commissioned without serving on a board. So, in this situation you would be ordained by your congregation as a deacon and commissioned by the presbytery for this particular pastoral task.

**How are officers commissioned to celebrate the sacraments with a congregation?**

In section 2.0502 of ECO's polity:

*The Church exists wherever two or more are gathered in the name of Jesus. Therefore, it is appropriate to celebrate sacraments in these smaller units. These smaller units include, but are not limited to: small groups, missional communities, retreats, leaders of satellite congregations, and*

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*house church gatherings. If an officer has been commissioned by the session to lead these groups in mission or ministry and has been appropriately trained, he or she shall be authorized to administer the sacraments in these communities. The pastor and the session shall oversee those who are commissioned to such service within a congregation. This commission shall be for a period of twelve months and may be renewed indefinitely.*

There are a few things that are important about the sacrament part of our polity.

1. Commissioning falls under the authority of the local session, not the presbytery.
2. Commissioning is to celebrate the sacraments within the jurisdiction of the local church.
3. The person being commissioned receives additional training beyond his or her training as an elder or deacon in order to have the theological competency and pastor skills to lead a “mirco-expression” of an established church.

**a. What is a mirco-expression of church?**

Jesus says “wherever two or three are gathered in my name there I am.” Jesus is not saying that He doesn’t bother to show up when we pray and read our Bibles if we are doing so on our own. But rather if a few people are functioning together in the name of Jesus then Jesus is in and among them. This is an expression of the body of Christ.

Functionally, these expressions would be small groups or missional communities, which are groups that have a high commitment to one another and are dedicated to fulfilling the functions of “church” together. These micro-expressions of church don’t replace the need to engage in the mission and ministry of an established congregation. But by seeing one’s involvement in the body of Christ at both the micro level as well as the established church level will greatly enhance one’s participation in ministry.

Because these micro-expressions of church are still valid expressions of church, it is appropriate to celebrate the sacraments within them. For both practical reasons as well as to unleash lay people in ministry, ECO has allowed the session to provide additional training to particular officers so that they can be celebrating the sacraments in these contexts.

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**b. What training is required for an officer to be commissioned to celebrate the sacraments in these micro-expressions?**

This decision is made by the local session, however, since the person is serving as a leader of a smaller micro-expression of church, it is recommended that he or she has instruction in the following:

- Theological knowledge of the sacraments in the Reformed tradition
- A depth of theological understanding of the beliefs contained in the essentials so that they are able to instruct and train others within those micro-expressions.
- A depth of understanding of God's word that can allow them to both teach others biblical truths as well as instructing on how to study and grow in one's understanding of the Word.
- An ability to have leadership and interpersonal skills necessary to lead and multiply a micro-expression of church.

**c. Do officers that are commissioned in this way have votes in presbytery?**

No. Because being commissioned to do sacraments is under the jurisdiction of the local session, officers who are commissioned in this way do not have a role in presbytery unless they are serving as the elder delegates from their congregation.

**d. What if I was a commissioned ruling elder in the PC(USA) but serving within a church and not as the pastor of the church?**

Your function within your church can stay the same. However, since your commission is now under the authority of the session and not the presbytery, you will not have voice or vote in presbytery, unless you are serving in the capacity as an elder delegate in your congregation.