



ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians

Our Mission: To Build Flourishing Churches That Make Disciples of Jesus Christ

Rev. Dr. Dana S. Allin

Synod Executive
Direct: 805.319.4044
dana@eco-pres.org

5638 Hollister Ave. Suite #200 Goleta, CA 93117
Ph: 855.ECO.ECO8 (326-3268) F: 805.319.4047
www.eco-pres.org

Dear ECO Presbytery Leadership,

We have just finished up a 2-day conversation between ECO (represented by Nate Dreesmann and myself) and the PC(USA). This conversation was facilitated by the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). The WCRC is the reformed ecumenical organization to which both PC(USA) and ECO are members. The meeting was initiated after the PC(USA) went to the WCRC to raise questions about how ECO has taken in churches that haven't gone through the PC(USA) dismissal process.

On the first day of our meeting, stories were shared from both ECO and PC(USA) entities. These stories centered on pain, as well as the loss of witness for the gospel that has occurred over time. The second day was focused on trying to find a way forward that respects each other's denominational polities, as well as strengthens our Christian witness across our communities and the world.

I would summarize the main desires of each denomination in the following ways: The PC(USA) desires that ECO presbyteries respect the dismissal process of PC(USA) presbyteries. They do not want us to take in churches that have disaffiliated. I would summarize our position as wanting fair, just, and reasonable processes by which congregations can pursue dismissal. (FYI, 97% of the congregations we have received in ECO have gone through the dismissal process and 3% have been taken in from independent status because of disaffiliating from the PC(USA).) Our desire is to reserve the right to take in congregations that have no way forward besides disaffiliation.

This subject, as you can imagine, raised considerable disagreement and discussion. The PC(USA) wanted us to promise to never take in a congregation that didn't go through the dismissal process. We said we could only make that promise if there was a just and reasonable process in place and that their presbyteries didn't threaten congregations. The PC(USA) could not agree to that stipulation. As a result, we couldn't agree that ECO would never take in a congregation through disaffiliation.

Before I discuss the solution to which we arrived, it would be helpful to mention what we discovered to be the key difference between the PC(USA)'s ecclesiology and ECO's ecclesiology.

In ECO, we would say that we are neither hierarchical nor congregational. We would describe ourselves as connectional and covenantal. We also believe that the primary expression of mission is the local congregation. Our mission statement is, "to build flourishing churches that make disciples of Jesus Christ." We believe that our congregations enter a voluntary covenant with the denomination through the local presbytery. We believe that the denomination and the presbyteries exist to create an environment for our churches to flourish in their particular God-given mission. Our covenant is held together by mutual commitments to sharpen one another to fulfill God's unique mission in the community in which God has placed the local congregation.

We heard clearly from the PC(USA) that the fundamental unit of mission in their ecclesiology is presbyteries. Presbyteries have jurisdiction over their geographical areas to organize and oversee mission. Therefore, their churches are extensions of the presbyteries' mission. This realization helped us to understand why the PC(USA) was so insistent on presbyteries overseeing the dismissal process of their churches. It also helped the PC(USA) understand why we in ECO are adamant about protecting the rights of congregations in distress.

We realized that we have to hold these two ecclesiologies in tension with one another. Because of this tension, we will not be able to find a solution that is 100% satisfactory to either party. But we want to find a way to honor the other's polity as much as possible without violating our own ecclesiology. Therefore, we were able to come to some initial agreements that I think moved us closer to working better together.

Here are the four basic commitments made by those of us present at the meeting:

1. The leadership of ECO and PC(USA) committed to speak honorably about and to one another. We all admitted that there were times when speaking honorably had not occurred. In this spirit, we also committed to encourage our presbytery representatives to do the same.
2. The ECO and PC(USA) leadership committed to highly discourage civil litigation. We both committed to encourage our presbytery leadership to do the same. When a PC(USA) church approaches ECO and is contemplating court, we want to encourage those congregations to pursue alternative resolutions. When PC(USA) presbyteries consider entering litigation against a church, the PC(USA) will encourage them not to do so.
3. As congregations seek dismissal, PC(USA) leadership agreed to strongly encourage their presbyteries to engage in a just process.
4. Conversely, there are times when a congregation will come to an ECO presbytery to seek membership because they believe an unjust process exists. When such a situation occurs, Nate and I strongly encourage the ECO presbytery to contact the PC(USA) presbytery that the church is a part of (and desires to leave). Contact would be for the following purposes:
 - a. To check the validity of the congregation's story
 - b. If the process has been seen as unjust in the opinion of the ECO presbytery, the WCRC wants us to express the unjust nature of the situation to the PC(USA) presbytery as an ecumenical partner
 - c. To see if there is a way to work with the PC(USA) presbytery in the case to determine if an alternative resolution can be worked out so that the congregation doesn't have to disaffiliate

We realize that these disaffiliation situations are complicated. Each situation comes with a very different set of circumstances. As you navigate these scenarios, we encourage you to connect with Nate, and he will walk through the process with you in accordance with our agreements. Please note that the PC(USA) agreed to the above in theory but would like to discuss it at their mid-council leaders meeting in mid-October. We will keep you updated on the results of their meeting.

Since the very inception of ECO, our desire has been to glorify God and honor our brothers and sisters in Christ through our actions and attitudes. Clearly, doing this isn't always easy! Oftentimes, when pain has been experienced or perceived injustice has occurred, our temptation is to abandon our values.

David Lenz, pastor of Hope Church in Richfield, Minnesota, was one of our "witnesses" who articulated the injustices that occurred in Hope Church during their dismissal process. I was impressed that even in the midst of the difficulty David experienced, he said that he and his session held to Romans 12:9-10, which says, "Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor." I pray that we, myself included, may also exemplify this passage of scripture as we seek to be faithful witnesses in our ministries across the country.

Once again, I am reminded of how grateful I am to have such faithful, capable, and trustworthy leaders in you! We are truly so thankful that God has called each of you to presbytery leadership and appreciate your time, effort, energy, and prayerful hearts as we navigate tough situations together. May God empower you and fill you with his love and grace to continue your Kingdom work in the many cities, towns, and communities you all represent. Know that we are praying for you, and we humbly ask you do the same for us.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dana S. Allin". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rev. Dr. Dana S. Allin, Synod Executive