

Reasons for Change #4: Divided Loyalties & Diverted Energies

This is the fourth in a series of papers addressing the central reasons that the Session of CPC recommends to the congregation that Community Presbyterian Church seek dismissal from the PCUSA and seek affiliation with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. This paper speaks to the issues of divided loyalties within our current denomination and the diversion of energy as we continue to address these ongoing conflicts.

The Value of Denominational Connections

We believe that the church is bigger than just our particular congregation. Ideally, being a part of a denomination is a way to be connected, involved, and invested in the life and mission of the larger body of churches beyond our local community. The support, encouragement, resources, and accountability that congregations within a denomination offer each other can **profoundly strengthen the ministry of the local church**. When things are working as they should, a denominational connection can...

- extend our church's reach into the world,
- offer us wisdom and insights in new endeavors,
- keep us in line with orthodox Christian doctrine,
- and hold us accountable to healthy and honest ways of dealing with our difficulties.

When a denomination is healthy, the connections between churches are not just an encouragement but a real benefit to the mission of those churches. A denomination should enable churches together to do more than all of them could independently and should **multiply the effectiveness of the resources they invest together**. Sadly, over the past several decades our denomination has become increasingly dysfunctional. Today the PCUSA has become so divided that our affiliation is now a greater hindrance rather than a benefit for the ministries of our church. We see no hope to overcome the theological differences at the root of these divisions.

Divided Loyalties within the PCUSA)

Tangible tensions divide our denomination. As leaders of our churches gather together for Presbytery meetings throughout the year, we no longer gather as a unified body with the purpose of working together toward a shared vision and common set of goals. Instead, we align relationally and strategically in different "camps" with different and even opposing theologies, priorities, and hopes for the future of the larger church. Thankfully, our local Presbytery meetings have been consistently respectful and congenial in spite of our differences. Yet, there is a clear and growing awareness that we are struggling to hold together a sense of belonging and unity among churches that hold contrary views of Christ, scripture, and the witness we believe God intends us to show the world. The end result is that we gather expecting to disagree rather than to build on each other's efforts.

There are many examples of divided loyalties in the PCUSA. When a new church is being planned and developed in our Presbytery, we have to pause to ask ourselves whether the teaching and mission of this new church will be in alignment or in opposition to what we believe. When our Presbytery votes to elect delegates to represent "us" at a General Assembly, we are keenly aware that a candidate for this role will either go with the mission of upholding what we value as biblical standards or will contribute to the decline that we feel is eroding the integrity of our

Reasons for Change #4: Divided Loyalties & Diverted Energies

denomination. Instead of examining candidates for ministry according to a shared understanding of what a pastor believes and teaches, we simply determine whether the candidate is one of “ours” or one of “theirs.” One of the most telling indications of our current divisive state is the number of formally recognized organizations working at **cross purposes within our denomination**. These are a few of them:

<p>PCUSA Organizations Working to Uphold Biblical Standards of Belief and Practice in the Church</p> <p><i>Presbyterians for Renewal</i>, whose mission is “mobilizing the leaders of congregations within the PCUSA to be biblically faithful and missionally minded in their service to Jesus Christ (see www.pfrenewal.org)</p> <p><i>Presbyterian Coalition</i>, which identifies itself as a movement of people committed to life and transformation in the PCUSA by exalting Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, energizing its congregations, and upholding historic biblical leadership standards (see www.presbycoalition.org)</p> <p><i>Presbyterian Global Fellowship</i>, a covenant community of individuals and churches whose mission is to transform mainline congregations into missional communities following Jesus Christ (see www.presbyterianglobalfellowship.org)</p>	<p>PCUSA Organizations Working to Remove Current Standards in order to be More Inclusive of Divergent Beliefs and Practices in the Church</p> <p><i>That All May Freely Serve</i>, an organization advocating for the ordination of “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning” candidates for ministry and a network collaborating to remove the current ordination standards that they deem “offensive and exclusionary” (see http://tamfs.org) This past November our Presbytery voted (157-144) to validate the ministry of this organization.</p> <p><i>Covenant Network</i>, an organization formed in 1997 to support the passage of an amendment to our constitution that would remove our current ordination standards and has since led two subsequent efforts to do the same. (www.covnetpres.org)</p> <p><i>More Light Presbyterians</i> is an organization that seeks to follow the risen Christ, and make the Church a true community of hospitality. The mission of More Light Presbyterians is to work for the full participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people of faith in the life, ministry and witness of the Presbyterian Church (USA). (www.mlp.org/)</p>
--	--

Diverted Energies Spent on Denominational Conflicts

As a result of these divided loyalties and the need to address these conflicts, we divert large amounts of time, energy, and finances away from our core ministries. Legal battles continue as we and other like-minded churches seek to uphold biblical standards, which are repeatedly attacked from within our denomination. Recent legal efforts have cost hundreds of thousands of dollars in hopes of overturning actions of our SF Presbytery in the process of ordaining a minister who has declared a departure from the ordination standards in The Book of Order. Money which could have been invested in ministry and missions is being diverted for legal battles across our denomination and this is tragic. Similarly, when Presbyteries approach these contentious decisions, a great deal of pastors’ and elders’ time and energy is spent networking and strategizing ways to influence the outcome of the vote. Again and again leadership and their focus are diverted from the ministries and missions of our churches.

Reasons for Change #4: Divided Loyalties & Diverted Energies

Divisions and mistrust within our denomination have also gravely weakened support for our denomination's missions. Basic Mission Support to the General Assembly has declined over 10 percent since 1993. CPC, for example, does not give any undesignated funds to the missions efforts of our denomination because we do not trust that the money will be spent on efforts to advance the Kingdom of God. And we are not alone in that stance. In response to the broad decline in giving to joint missions the SF Presbytery has changed its missions funding strategy; it no longer expects churches to pool funds for common mission efforts. Instead the new philosophy encourages individual congregations to support those particular missions in which they believe.

A Healthier Future with the EPC

The leadership of CPC is attracted to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church as a denomination, because of its culture of genuine unity and support between the "family" of churches in the local presbytery. This quality connection stems from a united commitment to common essential beliefs and a shared sense of mission. We affirm that just as there is no perfect church, there is no perfect denomination. Yet, pastors and elders from several of the churches that have recently joined the EPC have enthusiastically shared a sense of relief and appreciation for the culture of trust, support, and collaboration in the EPC. This liberating feeling comes after many discouraging SF Presbytery experiences marked by years of embattled conflict in the PCUSA).

Those from CPC who have observed and interacted with EPC's Presbytery of the West affirm a clear sense of unity, trust, and intentional collaboration between the church leaders that were gathered. Our CPC leaders are enthusiastic about the EPC's Master Plan for National Outreach, entitled Vision 21. Vision 21 outlines an aggressive plan of church growth focusing on new church plants, domestically and internationally. In contrast to the obstacles to cooperative church planting efforts in the PCUSA), the Presbyteries within the EPC share a common strategic vision in the area of church planting and pursue all available options to maximize their collective efforts in this area of outreach. The EPC's parallel focus on World Outreach is uniting its churches to work and invest collaboratively to minister primarily among people groups who are yet unreached, with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In light of healthy missional fellowship and unity around core essential beliefs we see among the "family" of EPC churches, the Session of Community Presbyterian Church is asking our congregation to support moving our denominational affiliation from the PCUSA to the EPC. We feel it's in the best interest of our congregation to no longer be yoked with growing divisions, mistrust and diverted missional resources resulting from a fractured state. As we discern God's best for the future of our church, may we strive in our relationships with each other to live out the kind of unity and faithfulness we hope to see in the larger church.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Colossians 3:15-17