

CM – 17 – Union and Federated Congregations

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The Context

In this new millennium our presbyteries face many opportunities and challenges in enabling effective and relevant mission inside their bounds. As the presbyteries seek new ways of addressing ministry needs, we offer a look at a very old model, tried and true, but one possessing novel possibilities for our new day.

Historically, union¹ congregations involved uniting two Presbyterian congregations (from different Presbyterian denominations) or a Reformed congregation with a PC(USA) congregation. Federated² churches also connected two congregations, one of them a Presbyterian congregation, and one from a non-Reformed denomination. As we will see below, thanks to the 2006 advice of the Advisory Committee on the Constitution, those old definitions have been expanded and presbyteries now have even more flexibility.³

Once a presbytery has identified a setting where a union or federated congregation may be the most effective mission vehicle, it is critical that the presbytery assist the congregations in developing a plan of union/federation.⁴ If future mission is best served by a single congregation, and the two congregations come out of Reformed traditions or Christian churches that recognize Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, accept the authority of Scripture, and observe the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper (G-16.0101 and .0301), then a union congregation is likely the better option. If the situation before the presbytery makes it wise to retain two congregational identities, then a federated model is probably going to be more helpful. It will be wise early in the process for a presbytery to make the determination about which of these options will offer superior advantages for addressing a particular mission field. Both union and federated churches must be organized "acting in concert with a comparable governing body of another denomination or denominations."⁵

¹ G-16.0101 Union with Other Reformed Bodies

A particular church of this church may unite to form a union church with one or more particular churches which are members of other Reformed churches.

² G-15.0204b. Federated Church

A federated church shall conduct its life and work under a plan of agreement between the presbytery and the other governing body or bodies. This plan shall follow provisions of G-16.0000 as clearly as is practicable, and it shall be subject to the constitutions (disciplines or other organic documents) of each church involved. Whenever the constitutions differ, the mandatory provisions of one shall apply in all cases when the others are permissive. Whenever there are conflicting mandatory provisions, petition shall be made to the appropriate governing bodies of the denominations to resolve the conflict either by authoritative interpretation or by constitutional amendment.

³ [T]he intent of G-16.0301 is to enlarge the universe of potential union partners to include communions in addition to those of the Reformed tradition, but whose theology is broadly Christian (Item 07-02 Request 06-8, 2006)

⁴ G-16.0201 provides an outline that will be helpful in creating both union and federated congregations.

⁵ G-15.0204a. Union Church

A presbytery may authorize a particular church to form a federated or union church with a church or churches of another denomination or denominations, or may organize a federated or union church acting in concert with a comparable governing body of another denomination or denominations. For the formation of a union church see G-16.0000.

The Constitutional Explanation and Authority

A union church is formed by the creation of a single congregation from two or more congregations, at least one of which is a congregation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the other(s) being of one or more Reformed or Christian churches that recognize Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The new congregation would function as one congregation, ordinarily using one of the buildings of the original congregations, calling a pastor (or more than one), and electing a governing body (often called a session, board, or council, depending on the other denomination involved.) Their organization is written into a Plan of Union⁶.

A federated church is formed by the joint witness of two or more congregations, at least one of which is a congregation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the other(s) being of another Christian denomination or denominations, with each portion of the congregation subject to the constitutions of each church involved. Party congregations in the federated congregation retain their separate denominational affiliation. They may form separate corporations by which to hold property or the proceeds from the sale of property held in trust by the antecedent congregations. Persons who were members of the antecedent congregations at the time of federation retain their membership in their original denominations, and persons joining the federated congregation shall be assigned membership in one or another of the antecedent denominations as agreed upon by the plan of federation.

Practical Issues to Be Considered

Put simply, federated congregations maintain their distinct denominational identities for the duration of the federation. Union congregations become one church with relationships to two or more denominations. Presbyteries need to make an initial assessment of which of these options will provide the best local witness. We have seen “hosting” congregations wanting to be so inclusive to nesting immigrant congregations that they choose to form a union congregation so as to empower and welcome their new neighbors. We have seen congregations opt for federated relationships with UCC congregations, so as to provide inclusion of gay and lesbian leaders (on the UCC side only) that the PC(USA) congregation felt unable to offer. The context determines which option will best serve the Gospel.

Presbyteries will be rewarded by non-contentious dramatic joint witness if they spend the necessary time and energy to help the congregations develop a well designed Plan of Union/Federation or Covenant Agreement. Our *Book of Order* provides a very helpful outline of the topics that must be dealt with in G-16.0201 and G-16.0401. It is our experience that the congregations will very much appreciate the presbytery (and companion governing body of the other denomination) handling the “details” of the union/federation so the congregants that can

⁶ G-16.0201 and/or G-16.0401

get right into the joint ministry that has brought them to this point. It is a service that presbyteries are uniquely suited to provide. Often this happens with the help of an administrative commission that includes people with pastoral, polity, organizational, financial, real estate, legal, and similar skills. The Constitutional Musing on Merging Congregations may also be helpful as the commission looks at the issues that will need to be ironed out.⁷

There are a couple of provisions of G-16.0201 that merit explicit mention.

With other Reformed congregations ordained officers (G-16.0201h) rarely present issues, but with non-Reformed Christian congregations the idea of ordaining officers takes some real education. This is probably why even with more *Book of Order* freedom, most joint witnesses with congregations from non-Reformed denominations continue to be joined together as federated relationships; G-16.0401 provides guidance in these situations.

Not surprisingly, the issue we most often hear about is how to handle the multiple buildings. The PC(USA)'s trust clause (G-8.0201) is occasionally an issue⁸, but more often it is a lot more local and practical than that: which building will this new joint witness utilize for worship? Each situation will require careful analysis, but presbyteries should be careful to address these very emotional issues. The presbytery (or its administrative commission) should also be in close conversation with the governing body of the other congregation to resolve this issue in the Union/Federation Covenant Agreement.

While ordination standards and G-16.0201v⁹ get most of the church press attention, our experience is that most of the actual difficulties are much more likely to involve concerns of theological and polity congruence between the uniting congregations. Typically it is one of the other issues described in G-16.0201 that presbyteries find to be the sticking point.

Finally, for the truly practical, but perhaps explosive questions

Wise presbyteries will help the soon-to-be-joined congregations consider the following issues:

- What will we name this new organization? (hint: it's often helpful to retain some identifiable reference to both congregations)
- When reciting the Lord's Prayer, will we be seeking/giving forgiveness for Scottish "debts", German "trespasses", or American "sins"?

⁷ <http://www.pcusa.org/constitutionalservices/musings/note02.htm>

⁸ Presbyteries retain the same G-11.0103i, v & G-8.0000 powers the *Book of Order* provides in other contexts.

⁹ G-16.0201v and G-16.0401p Conflict of Constitutions

Wherever the constitutions of the denominations differ, the mandatory provisions of one shall apply in all cases when the others are permissive. Wherever there are conflicting mandatory provisions (except as provided in subsection q [G-16.0401k] above), the session of the union church shall petition the next higher governing bodies to overture their highest governing bodies to resolve the conflict either by authoritative interpretation or by constitutional amendment.

- When affirming our faith in the Apostle’s Creed, in United Methodist/PC(USA) connections, will “Jesus descend into Hell” or not?
- If the new relationship is with a non-Reformed congregation, what role will our *Book of Confessions* play in the congregation’s life?
- Will the new church alternate ministers from each denomination? If so, what process will be utilized? (hint: if joint witness is with a congregation from an episcopalian governance¹⁰, it is often wise to build into the Covenant Agreement that when it is the PC(USA)’s turn, the presbytery will utilize a designated pastor model, which will more closely “mimic” the system the non-PC(USA) congregation is used to.

Samples

Constitutional Services has not collected Covenant Agreements but urges presbyteries to post samples on the MGB Connect website at www.pcusa.org/mgbconnect/ under *Congregations*. You will find one posted there detailing the federation of a PC(USA) and United Methodist congregation.

¹⁰ United Methodist, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, as well as Episcopal Church